

PHANTASMA GORIA



omukuba otido

For :

Ray Bradbury , Philip K. Dick , Frank Herbert , Isaac Asimov , Frank Herbert again
and Kristen May

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	.....	1
INTRODUCTION	.....	2
DECA 1000 ACS	.....	3
CLOUD SENTIENCE	.....	13
FAIRY TALE	.....	16
THE GREEN HAT	.....	30
KANNA	.....	31
KAIZER WALTZ	.....	43
REGULAR JOB	.....	48
KAMI	.....	64
NECHO	.....	72
SHARMA	.....	80

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy

— *Hamlet Act I, Scene V*

DECA 1000 AAS

You must know what you're capable of - Zhang Yimou

DECA 0000 AFTER ADAMIC SLEEP

The waking was immediate and synchronized – perhaps the only thing that humanity ever did in true unity was the waking from what some journalist with a penchant for witty verbiage came to call the Adamic Sleep.

To be sure, the wording was but a detail , humanists called it the *Benevolent sleep* , religionists called it the *Apocalypse sleep* , philosophers used the term *Cosmological pause* and so on.

The evolutionists seemed to have something stuck up their collective throat as far as this one was concerned but they too, eventually landed on a term , that however, being too technical and obscure to make headlines , never caught on.

But perhaps ‘Benevolent sleep ’ would have been a more accurate coinage for it was evident that there was a Benevolence behind it. Perhaps an impersonal force . Perhaps God, the Alpha and Omega Himself. Perhaps, even a technologically advanced altruistic alien species.

This last possibility was arbitrarily accepted and the mysterious benefactors came to be known as The Benevolent Ones.

Humanity had a memory of what life was like before the sleep – it was a patchwork of gory images : environmental degradation, pollution ,political instability, insecurity ,infanticide, matricide, homicide, genocide ,drug abuse, child abuse, civil war , tribal war, world war....

... and then one day, at the very heart of this horror, there appeared a blinding brightness comparable only to the energy burst of a star gone nova and immediately afterwards a deep , unfathomable sleep.

...next the waking ; man rose to find the earth prepared for him like a neo paradise – a second Eden , one in which the beauty and variety of flora and fauna was matched only by the ingenuity and ready utility of new technologies.

Entire megapolises had been built, transport systems too , that could take a small family or an entire

assembly from one corner of the globe to another in a matter of minutes.

And finally, wonder of all wonders , the underwater cities and the Jurassic Parks complete with great Neanderthal beasts– dodo birds, saber tooth tigers and even dinosaurs.

The gargantuan lizards seemed to be the central feature of a mirage projected from the planet's furthest memories. They munched and stomped about harmlessly in the denseness of their verdant jungles entirely oblivious of their fascinated human audience.

There was no chance of the cold blooded beasts crossing over to populated cities – entire Islands had been set aside for them and in these they thrived .

The dinosaurs could be observed from a maze of transparent , spherical pathways that formed an intricate maze running on , over and even under the Jurassic islands. The material that made these wide man sized pipes was some form of ultra –reinforced diamond quartz . Not even the full weight of an adult T - Rex could put a dent on it. A trip to Jurassica was just a hovercraft away .

It was a time of marvel and wondrous disbelief – this was Deca 0000 After Adamic Sleep.

DECA 0300 AFTER ADAMIC SLEEP

The philosophical implications were immense : it took an entire 10 Deca for man to recover from the initial shock , and even after that there was the aftershock of discovering that they did not seem to age much or at all after adulthood.

The field of medicine was abandoned altogether , it was tacitly understood that persons who delved into a detailed study of the human biology were doing so out of curiosity or with the sole intent of determining the mysteries behind the new found longevity.

Engineering had to be abandoned too , there hardly seemed to be anything left to invent – however , with the death of engineering came the exciting revival of reverse engineering.

The technologies left behind by the Benevolent Ones lent themselves very well to this discipline , it was almost as if they were designed to readily reveal their design , to be undesigned and redesigned. It was theorized that perhaps after several hundred years of reverse engineering, man would approach the dangerous field of engineering with a new set of eyes. With the superior precepts , paradigms and technologies of the Benevolent ones and his own innate curiosity , the possibilities would be virtually unlimited.

Social anthropologists and demographers rose up to the ethnographic challenge of qualitatively cataloging a resurrected human race that did not have death at the core of its cultural experience. The unforeseen longevity that humans enjoyed necessitated an aging system based on time of birth.

Persons born during the first hundred Deca (A Deca being the equivalent of ten solar years) After Adamic

Sleep, including those who had risen from sleep were known as the Alpha Generation. Those born in the course of the next hundred Deca would be the Beta generation , after them would come the Gamma generation ,and so on.

DECA 0400 AFTER ADAMIC SLEEP

The disappearance of the island of Madagascar , more accurately - its atomic disintegration to pure particle – utter nothingness, was the beginning of the great controversy.

Over time , the self sustaining Energy Mantles that had been left behind by the Benevolent Ones had been re – engineered to forge Weapons of Cosmic Destruction.

Madagascar had been conducting experiments independently , as had many other nations but something went terribly wrong in Madagascar – a small isolated experiment spiraled madly out of control. The result was a disaster of hyperbolic proportions.

There had been political expedients for the development of the WCDs - it had been reasoned that perhaps the Benevolent Ones were not the only beings in the Universe.

The diplomats , politicians and lawmakers had sat down In hundreds of councils , general assemblies , closed door meetings , and decided that just as the presence and power of the Benevolent Ones was certain, so too the probable presence and unknown technological prowess of some other powerful cosmic entities. These hypothetical beings came to be known as the Malevolent Ones.

After all, the universe was a melee of axiomatic and logical dichotomies : good and evil , light and dark , yin and yang , Benevolence , Malevolence.

Suppose , it had been further theorized, that these shadowy Malevolent ones were to set their eyes upon the earth for reasons best known to them ; with their advanced technologies - the planet would be ridiculously vulnerable.

This conclusion was compounded by the fact that the Benevolent ones , for all their foresight and immense gifts to mankind had neglected to gift men with weapons of any kind. There was nothing in the form of armory. Not so much as a thorn.

With this as the main motivating factor , nations began experimenting with WCDs. Humanists and sociologists pointed out that if the forging of such weapons was truly in the interests of saving mankind as a whole from future attacks by a Malevolent race of advanced beings, then it only made sense that all nations engage in a single weapons program.

The idea seemed noble and practical enough but was soon shelved after it became clear that trying to get

the various Neo Energy Scientists to work together on any project or half project was a venture not so dissimilar to herding cats.

Within national boundaries , however , cooperative work and mutual research initiatives were found to be not only feasible but practicable. Indeed, they flourished.

After the Madagascan Chernobyl other nations at the forefront of WCD research and manufacture implemented tighter controls on their experiments.

The deaths of five million Madagascans had been regrettable , but the new standards that were adopted afterwards as a direct result of the tragedy proved to be life saving to other nations.

Not only were future disasters averted but there was a much needed streamlining of the reverse engineering and manufacturing process so that fully functional WCDs were complete and ready for deployment a full twenty Deca earlier than the most optimistic estimates had predicted.

DECA 0450 AFTER ADAMIC SLEEP

Dinosaurs were the first creatures to face the so called second extinction – gradually, the Amazon - wild exotic Jurassic parks that had been the delight of reborn mankind for Deca became eerily cold and silent. All that was left was the toxic stench of lizard carrion.

It made no sense ; there had been no earth wide climatic change ,no Great Flood , certainly no meteor from outer space and hardly any human interference in their natural habitat.

A Russian ecologist took a personal interest in the problem and after twenty Deca of painstaking research published his findings in the ominously named white paper :

I Death, I Raven – Madagascar , The Human Element And Ecological Ramifications.

It had been said that if all bees on the planet were to die , a chain of events would be triggered such that humanity would be extinct in less than a decade ; the ecologist showed that a similar set of events was responsible for the dinosaurs' disappearance.

By tracing species , sub species , migration patterns, food chains and eco systems from the Arctic to Antarctica , he proved beyond reasonable doubt that the extinction of a certain species of dung beetle that was to be found only in Madagascar (*Scarabaeus Susanus Moranus*) was the first of a series of events that led to the second demise of the Magnificent lizards.

The discovery was a humbling one – world leaders delivered speeches on the preservation of species and the importance of cherishing the natural environment - a heritage endowed unto mankind by the Benevolent ones.

The Russian ecologist was awarded the Nobel Prize ; a lucrative position at a prestigious Indian university followed soon afterwards.

He knew , however , that his work was far from over , his incisive foray into the neo – ecosystem had hinted of something else - something far more foreboding .

He did not want to do it, but he felt entitled to continue his research - to close his eyes and follow the string of evidence to where it led- and to publish his findings. His second academic paper on the subject, *Memento Mori - exploring the aftermath* , was not received with as much enthusiasm.

While he did not predict the extinction of humanity , he revealed that the extended longevity that man had been experiencing would not hold up for long. He theorized that the average human lifespan for the next generation would not go much further beyond the Pre Adamic 70 years.

The second paper was received coolly by academicians in general and disdainfully by Human biologists in particular , who felt that their field had been unduly encroached on by a ‘Prophet of Doom ecologist with no formal training in advanced genetics. ’

The general public , being general, was generally not interested .The entire matter was to them as distant and obtuse as a philosophical debate on the transcendental dialectic.

The ecologist was silently demoted from his post and he spent much of his time afterwards writing children’s books and studying the human genome .

DECA 0550 AFTER ADAMIC SLEEP

It was an unspeakable tragedy , parents who had borne children circa 0550 Deca AAS watched as their offspring aged and died before their eyes. The age of longevity was gone , it was now clear that the loss of Madagascar had meant not only the deaths of the five million , but of countless others who were yet to be born.

Generations Alpha to Gamma showed no signs of aging. Delta and Epsilon were aging albeit at a snail’s pace. It was the Zeta generation that was gone within a seventy year period. The Zetas themselves and whatever children they bore could never hope to live longer than that.

They and their children marked a slow descent for mankind - it was their generation that sparked a resurgence in the field of medicine. Funerals that had long been erased from mankind’s memory and graveyards that had been nothing but concepts in books of yore became grim realities.

Agelessness , and complete resistance to disease would have been a myth were it not for the first three generations – Alpha , Beta and Gamma. They did not look a day above thirty - but while their bodies did not age , their eyes were burdened with guilt. The guilt of knowing that their actions had led to the deaths of their children , their children’s children and all the generations afterwards.

DECA 0650 AFTER ADAMIC SLEEP

Then came scarcity , and with it war. The restructured eco-system left behind by the Benevolent ones had been finely balanced. Perhaps too finely balanced .It was not as robust as the previous one that had held itself together somewhat despite millennia of battering and neglect.

It was a planet-wide scarcity that had not been predicted even by our illustrious ecologist– however when it did befall the earth , he realized in retrospect that he ought to have seen it coming.

It was a scarcity of grass – God’s green grass. As botanists know, 90% of all foods are essentially grass or of grass. Rice is grass , wheat is grass , barley is grass , bamboo is grass. Man and beast cannot live without grass , if anything were to happen to the grass...

It was a leaf rust that devastated this essential staple - rich green fields were transformed into ugly metallic brown plains of death and starvation. With the shortage of grass came the deaths of livestock and wild beasts.

No one knew quite why but the thin strip of land that flanked the Nile did not seem to be affected by the leaf rust.Efforts were made to cultivate the Egyptian sub species of wheat , oat and barley in other lands but soon it became clear that it was not the crop but the soil that made those particular grasses thrive.

A certain species of bacteria that was found only along the Nile had formed a symbiotic relationship with the grasses. These organisms produced certain enzymes that could combat the leaf rust.

Scientists were able to replicate the Nile phenomenon, albeit in a limited sense.It took plenty of resources and specialized technologies to cultivate vast tracts of grain under precisely regulated conditions in thermo-hydro-domes . Some nations were able to do it successfully, some with little success and most, not at all.

Once more, the entire world flocked to Egypt for grain. The enzyme producing bacteria also became a major export to countries that could set up thermo-hydro-domes.

Within no time, the small nation became enormously wealthy. In most other parts of the world ,hunger took root and soon , its maternal relatives , disease and malnutrition crept in .

As some countries attained modest levels of success with artificial grain cultivation and became wealthy, others became dependent on these so called grain exporters and slipped into the mire of national debt and widespread poverty.

Meanwhile, all nations without exception had developed to perfection Weapons of Cosmic Destruction. The stage had been set for war.

DECA 0850 AFTER ADAMIC SLEEP

On 3rd Rahma , 0500 AAS , War was declared on Egypt by the United Conglomerate of Nations just a fortnight after Egypt had announced that it would reduce grain exports by 50%.

It was a logical decision, the reduction of exports. Egypt, which by then had expanded to what was formerly the Sudan had realized that their cultivation grounds would soon be depleted of all nutrients. By reducing exports, less land would need to be under cultivation. It was hoped that in two Deca the land that lay fallow would once more be ready for intense grain cultivation.

Egypt responded to the threat with a preemptive strike. Barely two hours after the official declaration of war , a Type I Hyper Matter Bomb was detonated over Karachi , the Headquarters of the Conglomerate of Nations.

Like the Madagascans before them , the Egyptians had terribly underestimated the raw power of Hyper Matter energy. The explosion that was meant to rattle Pakistan and India floored a third of Asia. It was as though an asteroid had struck the surface of the earth .In a brilliant fraction of a terrifying nanosecond, a population of one billion was disintegrated to quanta: anonymous bursts of light, unnamed packets energy .

When the Egyptian First Chancellor learned of the full effects of the HMB , he collapsed on the spot. Stroke; and soon afterwards, death. He was among the fortunate ones , he did not live to see what followed.

A wild earthquake shook Egypt as it did the rest of the earth - the blast had created major instabilities in the earth's crust – tectonic plates crumbled , coagulated and shifted in a frantic effort to attain some semblance of equilibrium.

This was the beginning of the Seismic age. From that moment hence , quakes and tremors became as common as the flu. Sunshine also became a rarity – the blast had whipped up a ocean of dust that mushroomed skywards and spread evenly over the stratosphere.

The dust around Asia was too thick to allow sunlight to penetrate - this marked the onset of a second Ice Age on the continent – everything froze – rivers , streams, swamps, lakes and entire portions of the east china sea.

The dust had a startlingly different effect on other continents – in much of South America , for instance , a translucent film stretched across the skies , diffracting sunlight and sealing in terrestrial radiation inside a flaky insulating blanket - here the earth became an uninhabitable oven.

DECA 1000 AFTER ADAMIC SLEEP

It is impossible to walk outside without a shield suit for protection from the extremes – there is no life on the surface of the earth – what food may be grown can only be cultivated deep underground in giant thermo-regulated vats and under carefully controlled artificial light.

The alpha generation, those of us who are still left , still do not seem to be aging despite the harsh conditions and poor nutrition; we look wizened and wiry but we are still strong – essentially young.

Indeed, my husband's work indicates that we of the alpha generation will be around for much , much longer – not an eternity , but five generations , each a hundred Deca long . He says we have the golden DNA.

We brought as much of his lab as we could salvage – over time , he has gathered millions of species of plants ; these will be indispensable at the Second awakening – a vague time in the future when we hope the earth will once more be habitable and mankind , a much wiser mankind , may reign over it .

He says it will take three hundred more Deca for that to happen – perhaps even shorter than that given the absolute absence of humans, the handful that had survived having fled to what was left of the underwater cities or the hastily burrowed underground colonies.

We pray for the Benevolent ones to come again, but should they return , would we have the courage to face them ? We had stood in dread of the Malevolent ones for so long but little did we know that we were the most malevolent ones in the universe. Our fear should have been that of ourselves.

Natalya Kravenovitch,

Chile ,

DECA 1000 AAS.

END

CLOUD SENTIENCE

The auditorium was full to the brim. A library kind of silence hang tentatively in the air as Professor Aida Amadu stepped on stage. She was not one to dwell on introductions – she dove into her material the instant the projector lit up.

As most of you are aware , I have been working on nanorobotic operations efficiency by implementing control from a remote and computationally superior infrastructure where operational resources – in this case memory and processing units - are virtually limitless. My ongoing project, dubbed cloud sentience is in essence an application of the web's client server paradigm in a nanorobotic context.

We will begin with a concrete example – I assume that all in the audience have a working knowledge of beta C. and are familiar with the following object oriented design patterns. Given a mutating function theta ...

Periodically, in the middle of the more involving algorithms , she would touch the ring on her finger. Affectionately, mournfully. April the 18th. Tomorrow would have marked their first year together as man and wife.

Professor Amadu would now be taking questions from the audience.

Aida liked to look at persons in the face when they spoke. She reached into her briefcase for her glasses. It was a rather masculine affair – the brief case. Actually it had once belonged to him. It was, to her, a tender reminder. Now where were her glasses? Her eyes skimmed over several items as she fished for them in the various compartments.

A scrap from a newspaper here – *Kidnapped Journalist found dead in Niger Delta.*

Her passport there – *The people's Republic of Nigeria.* The last stamp was barely a fortnight old.

A thick and thoroughly thumbed academic paper over – *Trypanosoma brucei (African Trypanosomiasis), session paper 1. Mutations, protist isolation and military implications.*

Ah , she finally found the elusive pair of glasses. She never understood how come it took her ages to perform the most mundane of tasks whereas she could work out the most abstract of computations in a matter of nanoseconds.

Facing the audience , she subconsciously assumed her lecture room pose. She was every inch the

academic. Someone raised his hand , she singled him out.

Forgive the impertinence Missis Aida,

— Miss.

Miss , Aida - I am a research editor for New Science. I have been a keen follower of your recent and also , your not so recent work and I would like to ask you a question.

The speaker was a red haired fellow of not more than twenty eight. He looked like the kind of person who was uncomfortable anywhere outside a lab and awkward in anything other than a lab coat. His voice , however , hinted that he was much older than he looked ; it was grainy and his manner of speech was graced by an efficient eloquence that came more from conscious effort and practice than from a natural aptitude for public speaking.

While your recent breakthroughs in nanorobotics and computational theory are a welcome development for that field, a section of the scientific community feel somewhat betrayed because barely two years ago you were involved in a startlingly different kind of research...

— *Ah yes , you must be referring to my tenure as the head of microbiology at Makerere.*

Exactly what I had in mind, and your part in NATO's Weapon Genesis project. Why you would completely abandon one extremely specialized field of study to delve almost immediately into a different, entirely unrelated one is cause for concern, or at least curiosity, especially considering that at the time you were the leading authority on protozoology

She had been expecting such a question, had answered it many times before and was ready to answer it numerous other times.

— *You are dangerously out of topic , if I may say so myself; this key note address is meant to explore challenges faced in advanced nanorobotic applications ; my career choice is terribly out of scope.*

Something of a half smile crossed her lips,

— *However , if you insist , and you journalists are famous for an irritating persistence, I will tell you this : Weapon Genesis , as you are fully aware was a military project. I felt that it went against my calling to use my knowledge in any venture whose ultimate goal was to kill other humans. As for the change to a different discipline, well, it was purely for sentimental purposes – my mother was a biologist, my father was a programmer. I have spent many years advancing my mother's preferred field of study. I decided to apply a bit of my intellect to my father's as well. Call it a need for balance; it was only fair since I was clearly his favorite.*

A modest murmur of laughter rippled through the audience – the old time male programmers beamed with some irrational, misplaced sense of pride. The journalist nodded and took his seat but he was too

intuitive and experienced to be fully convinced by what he quickly recognized to be a well rehearsed half truth. While those might have been valid reasons, his well trained gut told him that there was a secondary explanation, one that he would not be getting from this woman any time soon.

During the lunch break professor Aida sat alone – she pulled out her android tablet; a sleek nexus 7. It appeared that she was playing chess against the AI. However, a meticulous observer would have noticed that every move, instead of producing the expected history in chess notation , was generating a series of valid GPS coordinates. After about an hour she smiled to herself — it was a mirthless determined curve of the lips. *Checkmate*, she whispered. She connected the device to her PC then plugged her earphones into the tab — it was now time to make the call.

The Niger Delta - depending on whether you are a cartographer or a politician - is a cluster of either seven or nine states , from Ondo in the West to Cross River at the extreme East . The extremist group, People For The Emancipation of the Niger Delta (PEND) have active cells in all these states but their unofficial headquarters are at Bayelsa. It is here that their even more unofficial Commander in Chief , Onsonguni Olejubi is rumored to be in hiding, deep in the tangled towers of knotted mangroves.

The first thing that will strike a non native about the place is the thick heat – it assaults the senses with a mulish persistence and lingers on long after he has left the region, or the country for that matter. Perspiration clings close to the skin but doesn't seem to dissipate into the air. Soon ones clothes become a reflection of the swamp itself – soggy, salty, smothering.

They had just received a call from their man in the military – following an anonymous call from a member of the public whose location somehow evaded triangulation, their location had been uncovered ; the Nigerian Mobile Police, backed by a heavily armed contingent of the army ,were on their way.

Ukwe had brought the news to the boss but he did not seem too concerned – more accurately , he was too unwell to be concerned — and not just him , a strange kind of lethargy had overcome the entire camp since morning , some two hours after that swarm of queer looking stinging beetles had flown through the camp – Ukwe had lived here all his life but he never de see insects like those.

He had to warn the others ; presently , though he was feeling a bit thirsty and terribly sleepy – he could barely stand straight. Perhaps if he took a nap for a minute , just one minute ...

END

Fairy Tale

She had woken up long before him and had done quite a bit: made breakfast, cleaned and even had time catch up on some reading. She was an early sleeper, an early riser and a fastidious worker - today was one of those precious days on which she was reaping the rewards of her *painfully moderate habits*, as her brother Mark called them.

He was up two hours later at exactly seven. He found her curled at the sofa watching the all cartoons channel. His immediate impulse was to tease her for having an interest in *such childish preoccupations* but then he recalled that he had been doing so for the last two years since she moved in with him and that his half serious admonitions seemed to only strengthen her loony ways.

He had his breakfast in silence – it was toasted bread and coffee, the bread very pleasantly tanned, crisp, and the coffee deep, black and rich : everything was just as he liked it.

Seven thirty was threatening with malice - he needed to get going. He polished his shoes meticulously, wore the suit that he had set aside for the day, unplugged his car keys from a hook on the kitchen wall and headed for the door.

No word had passed between them as yet.

Neither of them was particularly chatty in the mornings. It may be tacitly concluded that this proclivity was merely hereditary and that there was no real disinclination towards engaging in conversation with each other.

Their mornings usually passed away in silence. It was in the evenings that they spoke.

Today, however, Kezia broke out of character; she stirred, turned by a fraction of a degree just before Mark was completely out the door and said :

“Aren’t you going to say thank you for the meal...”

That was what she *said*. It was a question but it was enunciated rather like a statement – as if she were relating to a third person how her brother had left without a word of thanks.

He paused awkwardly, pondering over the technicalities of giving a response. He had not exactly primed himself for such a ... situation. Routine was his bread and butter – this unexpected conversation, one that threatened to mature into a confrontation dishevelled him somewhat.

“Do I have to? I ate it didn’t I, that shows am appreciative, doesn’t it?”

Truth be told, he would have willingly furnished his appreciation on any other day as easily as he had

galloped the tea down today - but the perversity of human nature is that we tend to hold on most stubbornly to that which is on our hands whenever we feel someone is trying to wrest it from us, even if , really , the opening of our palms wouldn't cost a dime.

If it had struck him to say thanks before *she* had mentioned it, he might have done so with infinite grace and minimal circumlocution. As it was, however, he was looking for a bush around which to beat with much ceremonious ardour and a joke perhaps, to disguise his awkwardness.

Kezia knew her brother well enough , of course and she smiled inwardly at how he was wont to overlook some syllables when he was even slightly edgy.

She clucked; not disdainfully as such , but perhaps empathically.

"No wonder you don't have a girlfriend," it was the tone of a mother resigned to the fact that her child's weaknesses were irremediable.

"That's below the belt – what does that have to do with anything?"

He was getting hot in the ears and he realized, just a bit too late that he was falling into some kind of trap. Being good at this game himself, he added in an exaggerated sweet simpering tone :

"Thank you so much siz for breakfast , it was *sooooo* wonderful, it changed my world may you be blessed and have many children and may your children's children be blessed and may your children's children's children be..."

She plugged her forefingers into each of her ears and made a high pitched screeching sound indicative of her disinterest in his diverse benedictions – she had also closed her eyes , a non verbal cue that he had come to understand meant '*I don't want to see your ugly face*'.

They were – both of them , the most serious persons most of their acquaintances knew – but around each other , they could be so childlike , and at times childish , as if they were five year olds struggling to attain some kind of supremacy within the family. Something inside them had simply refused to grow up , and that something sometimes came to the fore when they were around each other.

She opened her eyes and stuck out her tongue. He must have been expecting that because her eyes opened to find that Mark was gone and that she had stuck her tongue out at the unassuming air.

They understood each other – that was as good a farewell as he could get, and , coming from her , it was all that he would need.

It was quarter past seven on a Monday morning and she had her whole day planned out: she was going to finally start doing some research on her end semester project report ,do some shopping, pay some bills and then she would write to her boyfriend , Ethan.

Ethan had been awarded a Government scholarship to the Ukraine and would be there for a year now, come September. They kept constantly in touch via email , online chats and the periodic long distance

phone call. Once in a while , though , she would write him a real *letter* in her own hand , fold it daintily in a perfumed envelop ,write out the address neatly in her most refined cursive font, walk to the post office, pay the extra fifty shillings for sending mail to a *territory that did not accept liability for uninsured parcels* , post it with a kiss and wait an entire month for a reply. For her ,it was both a ritual and an adventure.

If she managed to do all that before Mark got home –which was usually eight o'clock - she would reward herself by picking up Bronte's Jane Eyre and reading it for the third time as she cuddled in some snug corner on the sofa and had some hot chocolate. She missed cake, she would have liked to bake herself some cake and have it with the cocoa but the tedium of it all! Perhaps she would buy some on her way back from the post office; yes, that would have to do.

But there was something else she had to do first – something that she couldn't possibly do when Mark was around: she was going to have a bit of a chat with Linda.

Linda was herself - her other self that lived her life in dream – Kezia was only herself during the day; at night , it was Linda that reigned , it was she that traversed the wistful wispy reality of the dream world as Kezia's mind dulled off into sleep and her body went comatose; conversely it was Linda that receded to obscurity when morning came and Kezia woke up.

While it is impossible for most people to have any contact with their dream self or to even be aware of the existence of their twin beings, a few fortunate ones - a very few fortunate ones - like Kezia are not only aware of their second self being a distinct entity from their self , but are also capable of drawing them forth as it were and interacting freely with them even during their hours of wakefulness.

The dream self and the true self happen to share large segments of the same mind – thus they will tend to have shared memories. The true self will have vague memories of the dream self's experiences while in dream and the dream-self will in turn have half formed memories of the true self's waking experiences. It is no wonder, therefore, that most persons are able to recall stray fragments from their dreams even if they may be completely unaware of the existence of their metaphysical other.

Kezia happened to know this and many other subtle technicalities of the dream and real worlds. This was chiefly due to the fact that she had been able to summon Linda ever since she was twelve.

Summoning Linda, drawing her forth, causing her to emerge or whatever was never really difficult - most of the time , the very thought of her would be enough to make her materialize – this was one of those times.

"Something interesting happened to me yesterday night while you were snoring," Linda said with a foxy smile as she threw herself carelessly on the sofa next to Kezia.

She looked exactly like Kezia : an ample forehead, freckled cheeks , tender lips a well defined nose and thin eyebrows that formed gentle crescents over a pair of pale but beautiful brown eyes.

“Tell me more - am all ears ” Kezia couldn’t recall any of what she had dreamt the previous night but the look on Linda’s face told her that something interesting was afoot.

“I happened to be in one of the former Soviet Republics and I just so happened to come across...”

“...Ethan in a quaint bistro right next to Kiev University and he was wearing the yellow scarf I bought him before he left, ” Kezia picked up the statement from where Linda had left off.

Like most people Kezia forgot virtually all about her dreams and would only remember fragments of them if during the course of the day she came across items, persons or ideas that happened to be present in the previous night’s dream.

Being in constant communication with Linda had the benefit of making it easier for her to remember her dreams since Linda’s experiences in *her* world were what constituted most of their conversation. Occasionally, they did talk about Kezia’s world, but, quite obviously Linda’s was far more interesting. Furthermore, Linda could recall everything perfectly because to her, what Kezia regarded as dream was reality.

Now that Linda had mentioned the Ukraine, Kezia began piecing the dream together bit by bit , collecting the pieces from the recesses of her psyche.

“So you remember that much?” Linda asked , her eyes making it seem like she honestly hadn’t expected Kezia to get that far.

“Yes I do ... what happened after that?” Kezia leaned forward with gleaming eyes, eager to relive the experience in her memory as Linda unravelled the events.

“Well after having some cappuccino and muffins we went to his... ” she paused. It was a very deliberate pause.

“His car ? His room...” Kezia asked.

A sly look flashed across Linda’s face

“Am afraid that’s as much as am at liberty to say – the rest is fairly umm, confidential; if you don’t remember that much am afraid I can’t help you there.”

Kezia looked at her defiantly. She knew exactly what it was that Linda was trying to do – why , she did it to Mark all the time – by tantalizing the hearer with just a bit of what happened , it is possible to stir their curiosity to fever pitch, withdrawing the rest of the information and using it as leverage in the acquisition of a favour - or perhaps some *classified information*.

Well , Linda had played her cards right , but Kezia simply wasn’t one to fall for the same tricks that she herself had perfected :

“Why you calculating hussy - you realize don’t you ,that the only reason he shows up in your life is coz I keep thinking about him all day long – keep acting this smart and al start watching horror movies for two hours straight every night before I go to sleep – that ought to make your experiences more memorable

and much less confidential”

“...and you dare label me the evil one – you know it’ll just end up scaring you too!”

“True – but what scares me will terrify you – and the more scared I get – the more terrified will you.”

Now that Linda had mentioned Ethan, it brought to mind something that Kezia had always been meaning to ask – She wanted to know whether the Ethan that was in her dreams (and in Linda’s reality) was merely a manifestation of her thoughts and memories of Ethan or whether the Ethan in her dreams was Ethan’s dream-self; a unique individual, a flip side of him from another world altogether.

“That’s difficult to tell but I don’t think so because in that case your dreams would be synchronized wouldn’t they? I mean that when you dream of him then that would mean he would also be dreaming of you. The events that you experience as individuals in dream would then have to be identical.”

“Yes darling, thank you for the extended explanation, and yes, I do know what synchronized means! But just think about it - it just might be possible - Ethan says he dreams about me all the time. ”

“I live in the dream world but even I know that that’s what all guys say! The surest way of finding out is if he were also capable of making his dream self materialize – if the two of us were to meet, the Alpha Ethan and I, not your shrivelled up one - then maybe we would be able to find out for sure.

But as I told you before very few people are capable of making their dream selves physically manifest; as it is, right now you are one of only three humans alive who are capable of doing so.”

And then Linda’s voice changed. She abandoned her cavalier posture, sat upright and looked straight into Kezia’s eyes. Her voice was placid, her tone and mannerism acute. Linda was hardly ever like this - something big was in the offing.

“ Kez , I want you to listen very carefully to what am about to tell you...There’s something you need to know.”

...and then Linda told Kezia the most remarkable thing : that it was possible for Kezia to switch places with her– but only for a day. It was possible for Linda to settle into Kezia’s active mind and effectively take full control of her body during Kezia’s waking hours.

Kezia , in turn would slip into her own subconscious to remain passive until Linda began dreaming or until Linda summoned her forth. In short it was possible for them to reverse their roles.

Kezia’s eyes dilated, she was bubbling over with awe: the very prospect of it amazed her – she did not ask too many questions – it was thrilling just to think she could be transported to a fairy world where anything was possible and everything was...dreamy – if it were up to her she would have switched immediately but Linda calmed her and told her that they had to talk over some things first.

It was very important that nobody know that a switch had been made. Just like Kezia had vague memories of what was going on in Linda’s reality , so did Linda have but a faint clue of what was happening in

Kezia's life – in the material world.

Therefore it would be necessary for Kezia to fill Linda up on everything she was up to so that Kezia wouldn't be aloof. This was really not much of a problem since, because she had taken a short break from school, Mark was the only one who would need to be *fooled* and it was unlikely that he would be too keen seeing as he usually came from work exhausted and went straight to bed after having his supper.

And yes, there was the matter of his supper – today, Monday was Spaghetti day and Mark was such a devout adherent of routine that not having spaghetti on a Monday would ruin his entire day – what was left of it, anyway.

"You do know how to make Spaghetti don't you?" Kezia checked, just to be sure.

"My cooking is dreamy, I assure you; and besides, I'll be in your mind – that means I'll inherit all your past experiences and your present abilities – including your bad cooking."

"Just make supper early and slip into bed before eight – write a note saying you feel a tad unwell; the two of you may not even have to meet after all."

This seemed to solve the problem and after they ironed out one or more issues they were ready for the switch. Linda had one more thing to tell Kezia:

"I don't know much about reptiles, but human's don't dream throughout the night, its only during a period called REM that dreams occur – at other times – your mind is blank- when such a blank period comes you will feel sleepy – you may chose to go blank together with your mind and get some rest as well or you may chose to be a spectator."

"What does that mean?"

"This means watching someone else's dreams – it could be anyone as long as you know them – only your role will strictly be that of a spectator. You can lookie lookie but no touchy touchy. If you try to engage them in their dreams they won't notice you– it's like you won't even be there.

Also in the event that something unpleasant happens in your dreams like if you're getting chased by monsters or falling down an endless pit you may chose to wake me up out of it or you may again decide to walk in on someone else's dream and watch in.

The instant you decide to do any of these things the unpleasant scene in the dream will fade away – but if you chose to wake me up we will switch back immediately and that will be the end of your day in wonderland.

After we switch places, I will know everything about your world instantly – I will be in possession of all your emotions your memories your thoughts and your secrets, including where you hide your money !

The same thing applies on your end - you will also know everything about me and my world – only for you these things will come gradually – am telling you this before hand so that you may not realize these

possibilities when you only have a minute or two of dream left in you.

There are many other things you need to know, but as I said, these will come to you eventually. I just wanted to let you know about some of the options you have in case of a nightmare or maybe superannuated periods of non-REM sleep so that you may not end up regretting this switch, in which case am certain you will make me pay by whining for the rest of your natural life .

Any questions?"

Kezia shook her head distractedly, her mind was still trying to absorb the fact that she could literally watch in on someone else's dream. She wondered how it would feel like and then she asked herself whether doing so wouldn't amount to an invasion of privacy...or something even worse.

"One more thing ,” Linda said “in case you walk in on someone's dream and come across an idea or a concept and then later on decide to use the idea to write a screenplay or a book , you will be guilty of copyright violation because artistic and intellectual properties are the sole possessions of their originators according to article 6 section 4 of the laws of.... ”

"You're so silly!" Kezia ended Linda's last speech when she realized that she was obviously joking. They had a short laugh over this and Kezia made the silent acknowledgement that inasmuch as they were supposedly alike, Linda was by far more talkative and jocular than she.

Start paying attention from here; this is where the story really begins:

At exactly midday the switch took place – slowly, Kezia began feeling sleepy as she slipped into the inactive recesses of her psyche – the room began getting blurry and shaky – the cartoons on the TV became one motionless yellow –green smudge, soon she went dark and blank as if dead.

As soon as Kezia went completely limp , Linda took over her body and mind , spreading over her frontal cortex, electrifying every kilometre of her nervous system, tantalizing her dendrites as they felt a new electrochemical force animating them, forcing awake her motor neurons and giving life to vegetating limbs

Linda was in – she extended her fingers before her , stretched out her arms, touched her cheeks with the back of her hands and was pleasantly surprised to find how velvety soft they were; she felt her eye brows, bent her toes and extended her legs further from her so that she could see their entire length.

It was more wonderful than she had ever imagined it would be – there was a new solidity, a fascinating grounding in her, in her feet, underneath her fingers, everywhere in this strange new world that was *really* there – a world that was neither hazy nor languid , one that would not fade away without warning, one whose colours were rigidly defined – a *real* world

Linda knew exactly what it was she had to do – she had been planning this day for quite some time now and there were many other secrets that she had not shared with Kezia.

In a flash , she knew everything there was to know about the real world; she knew how to turn on the

TV, how to fit the dishes into the dish washer , how to braid her hair, how to arrange it in bangs so that the wind would ruffle it slightly when it blew... It was like she had lived there her entire life and on top of that she had both the mannerisms and memories of Linda– in fact even Mark would have found it impossible to tell that she wasn't Kezia but someone else altogether.

Linda put the room in order and made sure every thing was in its place: the books, the book case, the book holders, the candles and the lamp stands.

Next she cleared the table, washed the dishes , cleaned up thoroughly after which she went into Kezia's room and stayed there for the next four hours. Anyone standing outside the door might have been struck by the silence that followed. It was a graveyard deadness during which nothing stirred except the clock on the wall that slid noiseless hours into the future.

When she emerged she was tired , her eyes were pale but they still had some verve in them . She smiled to herself – she had just completed the first phase of her plan.

Next, she would have to leave the house to go to the shopping centre then there was the second phase of her plan that she had to execute before Mark came home...

Before birth we are nonexistent – similarly, at death we cease to exist. All this while as Linda went about her various schemes, Kezia was in a state that could only be described as nonexistence: it was a deep dreamless sleep, a plunge into eternal abyss with neither sight nor sound , taste nor colour. She *was* but she did not know that she *was*. Cogito eluded her, and so did the sum of her existence.

Then, after a myriad eternities the time came and she became aware of herself : slowly ,she was drawn out of this abysmal lethargy and the first sensation that came to her was a strange one: levitation – she was weightless in a congealing world , everything was fluid , lazy ,distant and yet vivid – she was in the thick of it : this was the dream world.

Everything was new to her – she even felt different like she was in a body other than her own – her skin was snow white – she was Caucasian in this world and her hair was long ridiculously long.

Incidentally, she was a blonde and she couldn't help laughing at the thought – her snow white skin was almost transparent and there was a ring on each of her fingers whose nails were polished a deep thoughtful blue.

She was in an elaborate long skirted Victorian affair that was short at the front and flowing at the back with endless folds, it could have been a wedding dress but it was black and the veil over her head was black too – perhaps she was a bride in mourning or maybe this was just how people got married in this world: dressed in black while levitating

Her memories were coming to her all this while and she knew that at this point Linda had gone to sleep and was dreaming – *and what a strange dream this was!*

She was still contemplating the oddity of the situation when she realized that someone was watching her. Watching her very closely. She had transitioned from levitation to an upright position without quite noticing it and was presently in a bleak plane of space – she could make out some dim flickering lights in the distance but all around her was a thick blackness that was smoggy in its coalescence.

She became even more acutely aware of the second brooding presence and her heart thumped violently – she was having difficulty breathing - there was someone or something stalking her – she could not see it – she did not even know what it was but an image formed itself in her mind.

The image was that of a man in soiled and blood drenched clothes, a swarthy face and a cowboy hat that concealed – but not completely, a pair of eyes red with lust. The man , whose image was burned into her mind was terrifying - everything about him had been primed to arouse horror and when he opened his mouth, a slightly a forked tongue played at the edges of his lips

He was nearby – she could not see him but she could feel him - she could feel his breath on her shoulders – she knew he was there – and she knew she had to run. Despite her shortness of breath she scampered off aimlessly but no matter where she ran she could not shake off the disturbing presence of her invisible but present predator.

She was bare foot. An iciness overcame her and she felt as if her feet were frozen , she had ran into a small brook that was gradually increasing in volume . It was cold...it began at her toes and worked it way up her ankles and then her knees.

It was cold.

The stream underneath swelled into a violent bubbling current and now she was swimming against it clumsily, with her enormous dress proving to be the biggest hindrance to her progress.

What a nightmare! she thought to herself

Then she thought again – indeed this was a nightmare – literally and Linda's words came to mind :

Also in the event that something unpleasant happens in your dreams like if you're getting chased by monsters or falling down an endless pit you may chose to wake me up out of it or you may decide to walk in on someone else's dreams and watch in.

Her memories from the real world had been coming to her slowly and this one , it seemed came to her just in time. Still , it was easier said than done - how was she supposed to *walk in and watch someone else's dream ?*

Was there a button she was supposed to press, a lever she had to pull? What if the other person was also having a nightmare? Furthermore, whose dreams would she walk into? Her Brother's, her college professor's? The president of the republic? The cute gut next door ? Ethan ?

Ethan...

Yes, Ethan.

But Ethan says he dreams about me all the time...

-I live in the dream world but even I know that that's what all boys say!

It was time to prove Linda wrong. She was going to stray into Ethan's dreams. It would be most interesting to see herself through his eyes

As soon as she had arrived upon this thought the scenery changed – the dank darkness disappeared and she now found herself in a modestly furnished room.

It had a huge window with yellow curtains that had been drawn, pulled to the side and held by neat linen bands. There was a spread bed at one corner, a computer screen on a table nearby and a white carpet under her feet that felt tender and welcoming.

There were bright , vivid colours everywhere and she felt sure that if she licked anything, it would taste just like candy. Her body was warmed by a flood of sunlight that poured from the open window and touched at her freckles. Oddly enough, she was still wearing her mourning dress.

She knew where she was and further, *she knew where she was inside where she was.*

She was in Ethan's dream; and in the dream, she was in Ethan's room. She had never felt more at home in her entire life ; it was like she was never meant to be anywhere else. At that very moment Ethan must have been dreaming of his room. But where was Ethan himself ?

A slight noise attracted her attention and he saw him – he had been deep in a closet choosing what to wear - no wonder she had initially missed him

"Ethan,"

She called out thrilled, but he didn't seem to notice her at all.

Looky looky but no touchy touchy , Linda had mentioned. Apparently that also meant no 'heary hearty!' Kezia sulked and made a mental note to one day write a lengthy letter of complaint to whoever it was that formulated such rigid cosmic rules.

Ethan looked light headed and giddy like a boy watching his favourite cartoon, he was now thumbing through a selection of scarves, he got to the one that she had bought him – the blue one, he held it hesitantly and then picked a yellow one instead.

There was a knock Ethan rushed over to answer it – it was clear that he had been expecting someone.

There was a young girl behind the door and immediately their eyes met, she latched onto Ethan for a warm hug after which she brought out something from her bag and presented it to him.

She was so radiant – no, she was absolutely glowing; furthermore, she was very pleasing to look at: Her mahogany red hair was held up on one side by a pin , behind which its wealthy length was neatly stacked. Her eyebrows were exquisitely shaped and she had a small sharp chin that was placed slightly below a thin pair of cherry lips.

The girl did not seem to have a singular striking feature – her eyes, her lips and even her nose were most ordinary but her appearance, as a whole, was superbly attractive.

She was carelessly dressed in a yellow blouse and a gray tweed coat whose collars were slightly ruffled. She had an excellent figure but one could barely tell, the ugly coat didn't reveal much – her jeans were bulky and it was like she did not have any thighs on her person.

Her unrehearsed dress only seemed to emphasize how pretty she was - you couldn't take anything from – her: she was beautiful and she was happy.

Ethan's eyes glowed and he spoke to her gently in a tone that was full of fatherly warmth. When she spoke, she did so haltingly and with many deep blushes as if this were the first time she were speaking to a boy.

Kezia could not hear what they were saying – or rather, she couldn't understand what they were saying – they were speaking Russian .Still, their intonation , their gestures, their manner, the sync with in which their words flowed told her more than words ever could.

The girl was familiar. Very familiar. Kezia had vague memories of seeing her many times before , in this room, on the streets, in cafes...

She even knew her name: *Adriana*.

Ethan was holding something in his hand - it was the item that Adriana had just pulled from her bag – a gift , obviously ,wrapped in silver with purple ribbons that met to form a tidy little knot.

He smoothed his fingers along the gift box as if in admiration of the artfulness with which it had been wrapped then he slowly undid the ribbons – he was very careful, taking care not to tear through the material.

Kezia couldn't help herself. She edged closer to Ethan and peered over his shoulders –her curiosity had gotten the better of her: she wanted to see what the gift was.

It was all so crisp – she could literally feel the slight movement of his back and shoulders as he breathed – if she moved a bit closer, just a bit closer, she knew their cheeks would touch like they used to.

But for all her awareness of him – he didn't seem to notice her presence at all – she might as well have been the dead display on the computer monitor.

The gift was a framed photograph – it was Ethan and Adriana seated on a park bench - it was taken by someone who must have been standing over them; they were looking up and smiling – very conscious

that they were posing for a photograph.

It was a pretty picture – their faces were radiating from their earnest smiles. They were close to each other but not too close: they might have been lovers – but they looked more like brother and sister who were particularly fond of each other.

Ethan looked bashful and disinterested at the same time – Adriana, well she had this look on her face that seemed to say she was just happy to be alive at that time and to have Ethan all to herself at that place. Kezia couldn't bear to look at it anymore. She moved a step back, her legs were shaking; it was hardly noticeable, but they were.

They were going somewhere together – Ethan and Adriana -but before they left, Ethan took the picture and placed it next to his computer – where he would be seeing it all the time.

Carefully, and with a familiar smile, he straightened the awkward collar on her teal jacket and they went, leaving Kezia behind. She knew that she could follow them to wherever they were going if she wanted to but somehow she just did not have the strength.

She felt something scraping at her heart – she wanted to feel angry and sad but instead she felt a persistent crushing sadness. A massive blackness that pressed in on her and made her feel so smoggy in the middle of so much sunshine.

Now this was a true nightmare. Seeing this was so much worse than being chased by a beast. This was not a betrayal of the mind, it was a betrayal of the heart – she really wanted to hate Ethan but she knew he was not in control of his dreams.

That he dreamt of another was painful enough, but that the dreams were full of such tenderness and sincerity, such unaffected geniality and purity was unbearable. She really needed to despise Ethan just then but how could she? He was not in control of his dreams or was he? Perhaps this Adriana did not even exist in reality maybe she was just a singer or an actress he had a crush on. Still...

She did not feel like this dream world anymore.

....in the event that something unpleasant happens in your dreams like if you're getting chased by monsters or falling down an endless pit you may choose to wake me out of it or you may just walk into someone's dream

She decided to wake Linda out of it – she did not feel like living through this or any other dream.

Just like the first time, there was an instantaneous transformation once she had fully decided on what it was she wanted. Before she knew it, she was out of Ethan's dream – next was the transition from the dream state to the waking state. She thought she would be back in her body immediately but she was wrong

Instead of an instantaneous switch, she found herself suspended in a sleep-wake purgatory for what seemed like days and she could feel nothing but her mind. Nothing but a defiant awareness of self that

held onto or that perhaps held onto her.

Her mind became sponge like – she could virtually feel her neurons stretching out , exploring alternative realities, she sensed sizzling electrochemistry as her synaptic connections lit and dimmed tantalizing the most secluded sectors of her psyche.

Then she began knowing – it was as if her mind had become an open book and the universe was scribbling on it - she was adrift in the immense blackness of space absorbing, consuming, imbibing.

She learned. She learned that their switch had broken some unwritten cosmic rule and that one of them would have to pay for it with her very existence. She realized that Linda must have known all this and more – and had chosen not tell her... but why?

She drifted endlessly in a consuming maelstrom, absorbing more and more and then, when she least expected it – she woke up.

She jerked up. She was in a cold sweat. She was trembling. She was breathing heavily. She was upright, on her bed and it was exactly midday.

Her room was neatly arranged , neater than it had ever been.

Since she was alive, she knew that Linda was gone – gone for good - it was she that had ended up paying the price for their crime.

Despite this, Kezia consciously and earnestly tried to bring her forth – usually, just thinking of her was enough to make her emerge – but today it was hopeless – part of her had known it would not work even before she tried it.

On her desk, printed and neatly bound was a copy of her end Semester project report

Subliminal conditioning and the philosophy of Philip K. Dick , by Kezia Kavedza :

She picked it up with trembling fingers; it was all done: introduction, main body, conclusion and appendix – if she remembered well enough – and she did - she had only gotten as far as the cover page. It was yesterday that she was supposed to begin her research.

Next to the report was her cell phone – she had a message:

I really needed to hear that, I Love you too – and thanks for the cake

It was from Mark. Mark! where had that come from – ?

... I love you too; it had said – knowing Mark , that probably meant that...

With this thought , she navigated to the sent messages folder on her phone and sure enough turns out “she” had sent Mark a message late last night :

I've never really thanked you for taking good care of me ever since Mom and Dad Left us – You're all the

family I have and I love you very much -

That text was nothing like her...and yet, strangely enough it did say exactly what she felt ; what she always wanted to tell her brother but never quite knew how to.

She wandered through the house as if she were seeing it for the first time – there was some breakfast in the microwave , in the fridge a slice of cake, and next to it a folded note :

Goodbye, Kezia

It was in writing similar to hers, but not quite hers.

She took the cake, fished a fork from somewhere and plunged it into its rich crust. In the sitting room, found a selection of horror movies next to the DVD player.

One of them had the title *the snake man of Tahiti* gruesomely scrawled on its cover and on it was a very familiar looking beastlike man with a forked tongue.

She knew. She knew why Linda had watched so many horror movies the previous night.

Her front teeth dug into the soft brown cake and almost simultaneously , tears fell from her eyes and ran down her cheeks – there was no change in her facial expression no contortion occasioned by pain or bitterness; just the tears, those twin droplets were all the hint of the oceanic sadness that welled up inside her: She had just lost her best friends.

END

THE GREEN HAT

*Your mastery of form and technique make you superior – she knows she cannot win this time round.
But she is a sly one – do not be surprised if she resorts to distractions.*

Thus had Master Fao cautioned me before the contest. My stomach churned from anticipation. I Knew I would be the first warrior from the Dragon Country to defeat the invincible Natari Sama.

The crowd was silent. Invisible. I sat before the multi-tiered Chautrang set. Our eyes met. Hers were the eyes of a scheming serpent. The Brazilian rainbow boa. She had a long sleeved blouse and on her head, an innocuous looking green hat.

Five white doves were released to signify the beginning of the silent battle. Soon I was winning, even Master Fao found me intimidating whenever I began with the Hindustani defense and progressed to an Asimovian position of iterative counter attack. She pulled back her sleeves to reveal her arms. Immediately, I saw her tattoos – they were superb - winding, slithering lithely in magnificent calligraphic curls.

Aha ! she was trying to distract me!

I shifted focus from the arms to the hat, I would look at the harmless hat, I decided. I gazed at it, its layered shades of iridescent green , jade and aquamarine – how subtly they blended into each other. So hypnotic , transcendent and sublime.

She made her move , I hardly noticed , I moved a piece and went back to the hat.

“triple - checkmate!” she whispered, some seven moves later.

I had lost.

“You got distracted! ” Master Fao Lamented afterwards.

“But I never looked at her tattoos I ignored them completely.”

“The tattoos were a decoy,” he moaned, “she got you with the green hat!”

END

KANNA

EARTH, ALPHA COSMSOS 2005

They left when it was safest, just before dawn . Trent knew a track that cut through the veldt , far from the highway and off the murrum roads. The idea was to cross into Namibia and from there secure passage to Australia.

Donna rode in the front with him , Hannah was at the back playing a small electric piano. At only seven she had grown to become quite the maestro herself, having learned everything from her father , the concert pianist.

They could hear explosions in the distance and at times the sporadic chatter of machine guns – a grim reminder that even though they were in the heart of an acacia and grassland paradise , the country was in the middle of war.

The civil war had dragged itself for the better part of a year and the rebel leader , Mtiaji Mobeggi was certain to become the new leader of the country. That was precisely why they had to flee while they still had the chance –Mobeggi's fascist ideals would not allow them to live in peace or at all given that they were of European Descent. He had committed gross atrocities in the name of cleansing the land - and that was while he was a guerilla fighter , surviving in the jungles and living in half shadows.

Now that he was sure to come into power Trent shuddered to think what he would do to so called *foreigners* like him. Foreigners – he found the term especially disconcerting considering that his family had lived in Africa for over eight generations. They had originally immigrated from Austro Bavaria which since the unification of Nova Europe , was not even a country any more.

His daughter , Hannah seemed oblivious to all these concerns , any child ought to be – to her , the trip was just another fascinating safari.

— *And this one?*

She asked , and then played something on the piano.

It was a favorite game of theirs - she would play part of a piece and ask her father what she was playing – Trent always won , of course , but of late Hannah had been getting more ingenious and he found their little game to be less of an idle diversion and more of an intellectual challenge. Right now it proved to be

a useful distraction, keeping his mind off the dangerous pathways of endless speculation.

— *Nice try,*

He smiled after she was done , Donna could tell that he was barely able to conceal his pride.

— *You began with Vivaldi's Spring but in the middle you forced in a couple of notes from Bach's opening symphony number five , before concluding with a very garbled version of what I believe you intended to be the wedding March.*

Hannah pouted :

— *That wasn't garbled – that's how it's supposed to sound - I could play it your way if I wanted to but I don't have fat fingers.*

Did you just call daddy fat? — Trent feigned dismay.

Hannah giggled , the gap between her young kitten teeth showing , as she buried her face in her palms , peeking at her father's reflection at the front view mirror.

Donna , your little girl here has just made a serious allegation... —

Outside , the jeep's thickly treaded tyres braved a rocky road that cut into tangled acres of flame trees, tamarinds, mahogany , shrub and creepers. They followed a dirt road hacked out by illegal loggers and poachers – Trent would never have thought he would be thankful for anything they did – but here he was...

The veldt slowly gave way to thick tropical rainforest – a rather out of place junglescape created by the sprawling delta of the Okovango river whose lazy roar reverberated from the near distance. They had less than a mile to go –

The roar of the Okovango was now furious. So furious it almost drowned out the sound of machine guns. Trent felt an irresistible panic grip him – *they were under attack!* Bullets tore through the jeep's metallic frame ; flying shrapnel ricocheted into the bush.

Desperate, he rammed his foot down on the accelerator , simultaneously yanking Donna downwards as the windscreen shattered.

However it became clear that he had driven into an area of even more intense fire. There was a high pitched hiss followed by a perfectly timed bazooka shot that blasted off the vehicle's front wheels. The jeep flipped over several times and then came to a sudden and uncomfortable halt.

The first flip was so violent its brute force hurled Trent through the windscreen onto the jungle floor. He was numb. He heard footsteps. He tasted blood on his lips. His legs felt as if they were on fire. He lifted his head slightly to discover that his trousers were , in fact , literally on fire. To his left , the back of the jeep had been wasted beyond recognition – it was nothing but an ugly jumble of steel and glass. The sight

of it alone shattered his heart –*Hannah was back there* ! He saw Hannah’s limp body inside what was left of it ; she had been horrendously mangled by shafts of steel and shards of glass , the piano was shattered beyond recognition and stained with blood.

The footsteps got closer. Blurred out humanoid shapes approached him. He wanted to plead with them for the life of his daughter and his wife but no sound left his mouth. Someone approached and began an exhaustive exploration into Trent’s pockets. He fished out his wallet , credit cards , a couple of coins and a passport.

A group of men surrounded the jeep. One of them held a lighter in one hand and a canister of paraffin in the other . He saw them roughly dragging an unconscious Donna from the front seat. One of them looked through her pockets. A fire was now dancing dangerously close to the jeep. One of the men held a thick staff , he was trying to reach for something inside the car. *Hannah* ?No, he was actually fishing for Donna’s purse. Any interest he had in whatever was still in the vehicle died once he retrieved it by its straps.

The flames that initially had been but docile tongues scraping across the sides of the vehicle slowly gained courage and blossomed to wild whorls of blazing violet , amber and yellow. Gradually, they consumed the entire car. The searing heat waves were so intense that even their ambushers kept a distance.

Then, as if playing a part in a dreamlike drama, the skies opened and an immense blackness engulfed the entire jungle. Wild rings of lightning flashed from a spiraling aperture in the sky.

Trent saw , or at least thought he saw a city of immense and unbelievable proportions. He remembered reading about heaven , the New Jerusalem. Was this it?

YERTH,BETA COSMOS β $\Phi\chi\chi\Xi$

They called it bloodless.

In all honesty though , Tara would have preferred blood and corpses over the so called bloodless warfare because at least a body gives you something to bury – some centroid around which to concentrate and agglutinate your grief and anger.

Multi Dimension Recalibration Weaponry was supposed to be more humane because rather than killing the enemy , they *merely* teleported them to any of an infinite amount of parallel universes.

The Corporate Conglomerate of Nations was quick to point out that since MDR weapons did not in themselves result in any deaths , there was ultimately no gross Kannation of human rights by corporate nations that chose to conduct MDR warfare. Why ,there were even reports of persons being teleported to lush paradise planets or rich, thriving civilizations.

No mention , however , was made of uninhabitable , hostile , and ruined worlds. The CCN made it all look pleasant but Tara knew the reality was a lot grimmer than that – Multi Dimensionality was still a work in progress, in theory there are an infinite number of parallel universes but in practice there might only be a dozen that might be reachable and of those perhaps only a handful that might support human life – or at least humans with the biology and anatomy of Yerthlings.

Tara was absent mindedly mulling over these implications as he , his daughter Kanna and his complement Adina lined up to get their weekly rations at the CCN mega mall.

The line had just slugged up to them when a warning siren blared :

There was an incoming attack – all citizens were requested to retreat to their anti –dimensionality bunkers. Those who did not have bunkers in their homes could find refuge in any of the mass ADM bunkers that at following locations...

Number one – don't panic – number two – be decisive – number three , Kanna and Adina come first. Tara kept repeating this to himself as he grabbed his wife and daughter by their wrists and rushed for the hoverthopter

It would take about fifteen minutes at maximum velocity for them to get home. The mass Anti Dimensionality bunkers were poorly maintained , known to provide only token protection and notorious for animal stampedes in which hundreds died or sustained serious injuries.

Worse still In the likely event of a prolonged siege there was the veritable possibility of slow death by disease or starvation – a prospect that Tara found to be more unnerving than teleportation.

The skies were full of hoverthopters as frantic masses scrambled out of the target area to their private bunkers. Tara lifted Kanna onto the back seat and shut the door securely behind her. Adina joined him at the front. The thopter's ascent seemed painfully slow as outside the siren grew louder and louder.

In the far distance they could hear the wheezing hiss of giant attack hyperjets - they were getting within range , priming themselves for an MDR beam launch.

Their comparatively minuscule hoverthopter zipped through the air at a hundred dekats per second. Adina's hands were pressed closely by her side – little Kanna , only seven years old was crying copiously.

It's ok baby , Papa's going to build you a fire when we get home, Tara comforted her.

It was important that Kanna be calm – panic attacks in children were known to induce spontaneous human combustion.

The wheezing got closer, the attack hyperjets were gaining in dangerously – before he knew what was happening , Tara realized he could no longer control the thopter – the local singularities created by Multidimensional Weaponry overrode his antigravity controller. A portal was just about to open.

Their hoverthopter crashed violently to the ground – all around them bright rings of lightning zapped and they could feel a stinging sensation on their skins as their hairs literally stood on edge.

Entire buildings blocks were being sucked in , disappearing in the blink of an eye – above them the foreboding shadow of a non Ally attack vessel loomed ominously.

From its under bridge a final wave of multidimensionality pulses spread out – the rings of white were wider and more brilliant than ever – Tara knew that they were right at the heart of its event horizon. The waves tore through them immediately disassembling the hoverthopter.

A deafening wheeze overcame their senses and all they were conscious of afterward was a blinding infinity light.

EARTH, ALPHA COSMSOS 2005

Trent almost physically assaulted the young nurse who then ran out of the room shouting that the *mzungu* had lost his mind.

A dour looking doctor accompanied by a pair of burly guards came in almost immediately –

—Mr. Dieter what seems to the problem?

The doctor's voice was condescending, calm and controlled. He had seen this kind of thing before.

That...that fool – he say that my wife and daughter are waiting for me to come to —

—And what is wrong with that?

Am not certain about Donna , but I saw my daughter die in that car ...she's gone —

The doctor flipped through the medical chart at the side of his bed.

—You aaaare, Mr. Dieter , are you not?

Of course —

Trent Dieter ?

Yes —

Your spouse is Donna Dieter and this daughter , could it be one Hannah Dieter ?

Yes —

— Well sir , am afraid both of them are alive and well ; your wife is ready to be discharged and will be

seeing you soon – perhaps you will not be compelled to attack her physically when she tells you that your daughter is very much alive .

Trent's eyes widened into incredulous balls, he was spoke back like a madman ,overly animated , rumbling over words , periodically biting his tongue

But sir, I saw Hannah in that vehicle , underneath all the shrapnel ...she wasn't breathing and the jeep , they burned it - they burned it and she was still inside —

— Calm down mister, you need to rest , you lost plenty of blood and sustained multiple fractures to your cranium - all that could quite possibly have been a nightmare or a hallucination. Your wife and daughter are well and you have the Peace Keepers to thank for that – it appears you were ambushed by armed bandits on your way across the border. The Peace Keeping troops found you just in time and brought you here to the refugee camp.

While Trent was still trying to absorb all this , one of the burly male nurses deftly slid up to the side of his bed and injected him with a sedative. He was so sudden and precise, he might have been an assassin in another life. The doctor's final words seemed like the words from a sweet lullaby. He saw his white outline blur out into the distance as a sweet sleep engulfed him.

It took Trent an entire five months to fully accept that Hannah was alive .Even after the UNHCR organized for their safe passage to Australia , even after they had found a modest house in an inviting neighbourhood just outside Canberra , he just could not erase the fresh painful memories he had of his daughter dying in the Jeep. 'Memories', that he now knew to have been hallucinations perhaps triggered by panic and excessive blood loss.

It was only after accepting this reality that his mind began absorbing what Donna had been telling him for some time – there was something *wrong* with Hannah; not quite wrong but certainly , there was something *different* about her.

She would not speak, she barely ate but consumed prodigious amounts of water and milk; even her complexion was slightly different – it seemed as if she had gotten a shade or two darker . It was a uniform change that did not seem to be sparked by the change in environment – it could hardly be a tan – Canberra was much colder than their native country of Ikuxhosa that was right at the edge of the Kalahari.

She had been a brunette before , well, she still was but now her hair was flavored with numerous lines of snow white strands. She always cried. At night , she cried out loud and her temperature got to above forty eight degrees Celsius.

They took her to a pediatrician who after a three hour examination seemed to be none the wiser. It was

one of those benevolent moments when Hannah was crying silently. Thick, copious tears kept streaming down her eyes. It was almost as if she was in mourning.

The doctor called Donna aside -

I cannot explain her temperature – I am amazed that she is even alive – her internal organs should be fried by now – but amazingly they are working optimally.

As for her psychology , her state of mind , so to speak - I believe that the experience you had in the jungle wiped her mind clean. She may have been too young to absorb the shock of near death – memory erasure is a known defense mechanism against trauma.

But I suspect in the case of your little girl, the memory erasure did not stop there ,at the near death experience , but went further back. Her cognitive abilities are not impaired in any way, it just seems that everything she knew prior to the event – speech , interaction ,association ,music you name it – got wiped out.

You're going to have to assume she is a toddler again and teach her everything from scratch.

Also , has she ever been struck by lightning ?

No , why do you ask ? —

—The extensive Lichtenberg markings on her back and forearm seem to suggest that she has been struck by lightning , or at least suffered some manner of serious electrocution.

When Donna told Trent about the conversation with the doctor , he remembered the flashes of lightning he had seen and the immense futuristic cities , but how was he supposed to bring that up ? Wasn't all that supposed to be part of a hallucination ?

Making Hannah learn everything from scratch was easier said than done – it seemed impossible to teach her anything...she did not even respond to her name anymore – all she did was cry...

But then through the oddest of circumstances they discovered a way to calm her down. It was around midnight when Donna and Trent were woken up by Hannah's incessant crying. She was absolutely wailing. Trent reached out for the lights but they were not working – there were in the middle of a blackout.

- *I'll go get the candle*, Donna volunteered

They felt their way into Hannah's room. Trent reached out for her in the dark, touching her forehead. He drew back his hand immediately, she was unbelievably hot, as if she were literally on fire.

When Donna struck a match and lit the candle, the wailing stopped immediately. Hannah got up and sat at the edge of her bed paying rapt attention to the dancing flame from the candle wick.

An inexplicable calm came over her eyes and for the first time in months , Trent saw the shadow of a smile on his daughter's face.

That was how they discovered Hannah's near obsessive fascination with fire – they had only just learned to accept her supernormal body temperature and now this.

They quickly realized that any manner of interaction with Hannah in the absence of a flame of some sort was an exercise in futility. Fire had a settling effect on her , it to calmed her considerably , and once she became calm she became teachable.

Soon afterwards , she began speaking. However , her speech was so much gibberish , or at least it sounded like that to them , yet Trent could not help but notice that she was not mumbling aimlessly but speaking in complete words , that appeared to be arranged in coherent sentences. It was almost as if she was speaking another language altogether and not gibberish as such.

Overtime Hannah changed. She learned how to speak Zulu and English as fluently as her parents did; while she no longer needed to have candle flames around her in order to be coherent, it was clear she preferred having them around.

Her room came to look like a shrine to some favorite Hindu god , with rows upon rows of candles. Trent's greatest worry shifted from not being able to have any sort of connection with his daughter to worrying about her room bursting into flames.

One day , when she was fifteen , Hannah left her parents speechless when she lit some candles using just the tip of her fingers. It went further than that, as she grew older Hannah's capabilities as far as manipulation and spontaneous effusion of fire were concerned became prodigious.

She could toast bread with the palms of her hands – she could concentrate flames into a single intense beam that was strong enough, Trent found out , to conveniently take care of some welding that his car desperately needed.

They gave her the nickname *burning bush* because at times her entire body would be on fire, a fire which however did not consume her or the items around her -

Trent and Donna came to accept that their daughter was or at least had become different - they had long ago accepted that she had survived certain death. After that one miracle , it seemed sacrilegious to question these peculiar propensities , to do anything other than just be grateful.

Consequently , they were content to let Hannah be her flaming self in their home but were keen to any public displays of incineration.

At twenty two, Hannah gained precise control over her proclivities with flames – apart from an incredibly high body temperature , it was difficult to tell there was anything unique about her.

YERTH , BETA COSMOS $\beta \wedge \chi \chi \Xi$

The post war peace and reconciliation efforts spear headed by the Unified United Conglomerate of Corporate Nations were proceeding at a slow but sure pace.

The highlight of the entire process apart from mass disarmament, was of course the Multi Dimensionality reclamation procedure – those who had lost their dear ones to alternate dimensions could be reunited with them once more – all it took was a relocation and a reverse dimensioning process.

It was an entire fifteen years since Tara and Adina had lost their little Kanna – now they had located her on the alternate world , Earth but they were uncertain about what to do next - they had not quite moved on after her loss but now so many things had changed ...

Since then they had borne a son and there was the terror they had in them that perhaps their own daughter after so many years would not be able to recognize them , or that she would not think of them as her parents.

From their remote optiscope screens they could see just how lovely she had become , and as painful as it was , they could tell she was happy with her earth parents. Taking her away would mean robbing her of a loving family for a second time.

And yet she was their daughter , they did deserve to be with her...

There was a knock on their door.

Trent opened it to discover that he might have been looking at a mirror – the man opposite him was exactly like him , well not quite exactly – he was a shade darker and his hair seemed to have one or two more touches of white than his.

close by his side was a heavily veiled woman.

May we come in, we do not have much time —

He spoke like a foreigner – like someone whose first language clearly was not English yet Trent could not place the accent.

Trent was too stunned to protest, he stood aside to let them in.

The veiled lady sat down near the fire but Trent's double remained standing.

I am Tara and this is my complement Adina —

He paused slightly as if not quite sure what he should say next

...this is my complement Adina and, and we would like to see our daughter —

Your daughter ?

Yes , the girl you live with , the one you've been living with over the past fifteen years – she is our daughter —

Darling what's going on?

Donna had came from the Kitchen , holding a frying pan – when she saw the tanned man who looked exactly like her husband she dropped it on the carpeted floor. The silence that ensued was so thick you could sew a hem into it.

Donna slowly approached Tara peering at him as if closer scrutiny would somehow yield a logical explanation to the puzzle before her eyes. She safely concluded that she must be dreaming, and presently aired out this view.

— I must be dreaming

This is no dream —

Tara responded , *my complement and I* , he gestured towards the woman by the fire – *we are your alternates from a separate parallel. Adina , show her ,*

The woman gently removed her veil to show her face – a face that was exactly like Donna's except for a bit of a tan and several shades of white.

We would like to see our daughter...

Trent raised his voice :

What do you mean your daughter – I don't care what kind of prank this is – but Hannah is ours and you are not going to take her away from us —

Your daughter ...your Hannah. She died. She died that day in the jungle so many years ago. I believe you saw it with your own eyes. That was when we lost our Kanna - In our world there was a war - a portal to this dimension was opened during the fighting and our Kanna was pulled in .It's important that you know this – for the sake of the truth and also for the sake of your daughter's memory.

Am certain that you have noticed that our Kanna is very diff..

He never got the chance to finish his words The door flew wide open and in came Hannah. She was typing something into her cell phone and humming at the same time

Daddy , am Home

She called out without quite looking up – when she did look up, her jaw dropped visibly.

Daddy, who are these ? —

She seemed to be addressing Trent but her eyes were locked magnetically onto Tara , as if she were asking *him*.

Adina could no longer contain herself: She rose from her chair and swept Hannah into the air in an intense embrace. Gradually she released her and gently touched her cheeks with the tip of her fingers. Trent's doubts began fading away when he noticed that the strange woman's hands appeared to be on fire – there were beautiful purple flames that swished across Hannah's skin and into her hair.

Kanna , izkurtz – chobska – rufith – adith – barak – xalik – azak – izmu – argeth ,

Tara spoke , he was addressing Hannah

Trent found the words and construction to be vaguely familiar – they sounded so much like the *gibberish* that came from Hannah immediately after the accident. Hannah? *Was she even Hannah?*

Hannah hesitated for a while but then replied just as eloquently as if she had been expecting those words all her life :

Azen – ekkon – fadhil – mileel – tabir – wakka – abir – abir – tufsir- sina- kanna , izkurtz – chobska

Trent remembered his supposed 'hallucinations' seeing his daughter immobile in that vehicle with shafts of metal digging deep into her. He remembered the vehicle bursting into flames, the misplaced rings of lightning and the visions of a strange metropolis.

There had been no hallucinations. He had really lost his daughter. The full weight of Tara's words now

sunk in. *It was important that he and Donna mourn the loss of their only child.*

Later on , much later on , they held a small funeral and put up a tombstone in their back yard – Donna cried profusely – Trent wanted to but wasn't sure how Kanna would take it – he didn't want to make her feel that her worth was somewhat less than that of the daughter they had lost

Tara and Adina had left the same day they had come – they had never wanted to take Kanna back , given that she was in safe loving hands. They just wanted to see her one more time.

They left Kanna a picture of her brother back on Yerth - his eyes were just like flames.

END

KAIZER WALTZ

I: THE KAIZER

Gor Pablo Opiyo Kassim Otieno the All Father the Fiftieth was one in a long line of Kaizers that had reigned supreme over the Independent Sovereign State of Oseno. His wisdom, like his father's and his father's father, and his father's father's father was unmatched. Building on the solid foundation set by Gor Pablo Opiyo Kassim Otieno the All Father the Forty Ninth, Gor the Fiftieth had brought even more prosperity and splendor to the Independent Sovereign State of Oseno.

He had instituted the Torture Olympics, passed to law the selective bribery bill and approved the use of one billion Ose-Rands in Hyper Nuclear Weapons research and development.

Gor Pablo, like the other Kaizers before him, and perhaps more than them, tried to instill a healthy fear of the government in the public – both general and specific. His efforts were met with unprecedented success. Not only was he able to make the populace fear the Government, but he went a step further, making them want and love the fear.

“The state,” a fashionably inebriated Gor Pablo explained to a rather startled BBC foreign correspondent, “is not your mother; therefore the people do not and should not expect to be breast fed. This land is founded on the principles of love and fear. Remember the dictum of Gor Pablo the First: love your country, fear your Government.”

And great indeed, was the fear. Every Friday, the loyal Praetorian legion descended upon the homes of citizens, administering electro shock discipline using their tazer batons. Those who happened to be in the streets were not left behind in this national event. If anything, they had an even more up close and candid experience of the State's lovely and fearsome strength. Baton wielding Street Legions accompanied by well trained hyenas made sure the citizens felt the bite of order – if not on their shins then on their supple behinds.

Meanwhile, the Kaizer who was the most opulent, most copulent and most affluent personage on the continent contented himself with watching the daily dispensation of governmental dread from the coziness of his imperial pagoda, as he condescended to share the benefit of his great wisdom with whichever concubine had captured his imagination at that hour the day.

II. THE CITIZENS

The great love and adoration that the citizens had for their Kaizer was nothing short of legendary. Every home had a full sized portrait of the Kaizer framed over the living room with these solemn words of loyalty captioned underneath it:

The Kaizer is the head of this house , the unseen guest at every meal , the silent listener of every conversation , whenever one or two hunger for his sake , Lo! He is amongst them.

And how rich these words were in meaning, both literal and figurative, for the Kaizer's spies were at every corner, unseen zealots, keen to report and punish even the slightest tendencies towards lukewarm devotion. Furthermore, the working population, whose proclivities were principally agrarian in conviction, was required to offer the Kaizer a voluntary tribute of two thirds of the year's crop.

Finally, no meals were had on Sunday which was a day sanctified for prayer and fasting for the Kaizer's wealth. Hunger was not only an essential reminder of the great blessing they had in Gor Pablo but also a constant check that kept the people from being politically and ethically complacent.

A notable peculiarity about the Sovereign State of Oseno was that contrary to popular, or more accurately, international expectation, the citizens' loyalty and devotion to the Kaizer were sincere and heartfelt. They simply adored Gor Opiyo.

Their democratic system was the most transparent in the world; a flawless, precisely structured, perfectly ordered process whose final results were invariably beyond dispute. Elections were held every year and each time the people elected the Gor Opiyos to office.

'Neutral' observers in the ultra-modern world found this paradox intriguing: on one hand the validity of the election results were never in doubt (Osenian voting technology was so superior that the fraud detection and auditing firm KPMG - Kamau , Petro , Maina & Gikonyo - had awarded them a beta sigma 12 certificate – the highest accolade any intricately organized multi layered , multi process human-informatics infrastructure could hope to achieve. Overtime, the Osenian technique had become the de – facto worldwide standard for the electoral process), on the other, Osenians willfully put in power persons who openly included corruption , torture and population starvation in their manifestos.

Emeritus Professor Ogelubi Omoso Ochebe , a guest speaker at the IMF world forum , acclaimed Osenian academic and the leading authority on deterministic stoic solipsism attempted to demystify this phenomenon in his Treatise : State and Statesman - the unmasking of Osenian Governance and ideology, which read , in part

“...any ordered, semi ordered, orthodox , semi orthodox granular societal model, within the generally recognized axiomatic forms is hinged upon a secondary theoretical substratum that is subject to various

tensions. The strength of Oseno is that the populace has an intrinsic comprehension of the transcendental dialectic, elevating them to an *innen -aussein* strata where State and Statesman are interdependent but not one. The fear of the state is essential – the love for the statesman is necessary. It is through this monist manifestation of *spannungsbogen* that the nation survives and indeed, thrives.”

III: THE ASSASSIN

First Jakom, 2077. A terrible day. In the deepest pocket of night a veiled foe wielding a pressure gun infiltrated the imperial pagoda, found his way to the Kaizer’s sleeping chamber and sunk two drug laced darts into Gor Pablo Opiyo Kassim Otieno the Allfather the Fiftieth’s jugular.

The history books obstinately persist in referring to this enemy of the state as the Assassin of Jakom despite the unpalatable fact that the term assassin is etymologically incorrect, an assassin being a murderer of an important political or religious individual. In truth, the ‘assassin’ did not murder the Allfather but merely injected him with a potent serum that within minutes decelerated his mental and bodily processes to near zero.

But the Allfather was not one to go down so easily; before the cocktail of paralysis inducing drugs had run its entire course, Gor Opiyo had the awareness and singularity of mind to reach under the pillow for his blade.

He flipped the switch, the laser saber glowed - a deadly neon illumination. Edging forwards with ferocious eyes and rhino-like movements, he flung the blade at the Assassin’s neck. The criminal, an agile fellow, was able to dodge at the last instant but only just – the blade missed his vitals but ripped into his left thigh on its way down, tearing apart muscle and tendons with an ice cold burn. The Assassin was unable to hold back an agonized yowl before hopping awkwardly from the sleeping chambers and presumably fleeing into the darkness outside.

El Kifo Squad , the All Father’s personal contingent of mercenaries was summoned to Gor Opiyo’s room by a distress signal. They whooshed in to find their dazed liege stupefied, lethargic, and barely intelligible. Nevertheless, being the indomitable fighter he was, Gor Opiyo was able to exhume a few words before the toxins set him in a state of complete hibernation:

The Assassin has a limp, he rasped in a voice that took much after the scrape of sandpaper across wood , and I know who it is, the Assassin is no other than...

Sadly , the Kaizer found it impossible to say any more . As his faculty of speech left him, a look of intense malevolence set upon his face, and it was this expression that he held for the next sixty years, for incidentally, he did live to a ripe old age, spending the rest of his life in a tense vegetative state, a state not so

dissimilar to the one he had helped create.

IV: THE CONSEQUENCE

Immediately after the incapacitation of Gor Opiyo the manhunt for the limping man was on - all persons born or otherwise afflicted with a limp , half limp , bow legs, or even dubious peculiarities of gait and poise were jailed for life pending further investigations.

In fact, persons who had such 'undesirable traits' willingly handed themselves in to the authorities for fear that they indeed were the Assassin but had lost the memory of the assassination. One could never be too sure.

The citizens mourned prodigiously, they ripped their outer garments, wore sack cloth and buried their heads in ash and dust. This was the Apocalypse.

No one, to be sure was more affected by the murderous decapitation of the Allfather than his second in command , Ochuodho Kogeyo Radonn.

For Radonn , the entire nasty business was singularly traumatic. The Kaizer Gor Opiyo was a close personal friend of his. Furthermore, Radonn just so happened to have been within the sanctum of the imperial Pagoda on that fateful day. He would, he later wrote in a revealing and deeply personal memoir, be forever haunted by the fact that he had not been able to foresee and prevent the assassination. So traumatized was Radonn , in fact, that upon hearing the news, he immediately suffered a severe stroke that left him nerve dead from the waist down.

Some months later , when Radonn was appointed acting Allfather pending the imminent revival of Gor Opiyo , he tearfully expressed his grief at never having had the opportunity to let the Allfather know precisely what he meant to him and the nation. Radonn had lost the use of his lower body, true, but how he wished he could lose his life as well if only such a loss would revive Gor Opiyo.

Partner, Mentor, Friend, Sustainer, if only, if only ...if only we had known, if only it were me instead of you...

His unrehearsed sentiments were so moving and intense that even the most seasoned of the Praetorian legions shed copious tears.

V: THE AFTERMATH

Acting Allfather Radonn has proven to be a great disappointment to the people of Oseno - he has not as much as bothered to pursue Gor Opiyo's glorious visions for the state.

For instance, he has let Gor Opiyo's pet project of the Torture Olympics slip into disarray and has had the audacity to channel the Olympic kitty towards infrastructure development and healthcare.

The bulk of the Praetorian legion was offered early retirement and enrollment into the newly instituted national polytechnics. It goes without saying that the much depleted force can no longer afford to breed hyenas, nor can it continue the age old practice of street chases.

By Radonn's second year in power, even the much beloved electro - shock visitations by state agents to every household had become a thing of the past.

Radonn lowered the annual tribute paid the Kaizer to a mere tenth of that that had been required by the previous regimes. The people's disgust at this open insult was manifested by a wave of riotous protests.

But perhaps Radonn's handling of the riots, many critics have pointed out, was even worse than his complacency in allowing them to sprout in the first place.

Rather than direct his legions to fire live bullets into the crowds as was hoped for and expected, he made a public statement acknowledging that the tribute he required was merely a minimum and that members of the public who felt compelled to give more were most welcome to do so; the extra funds, he explained would be used in the education of orphans left behind by the last regime.

For now, Radonn continues to pass legislation and enact policies in total disregard to the populace. They suffer silently as their children grow healthier, their grain houses fatten and their cities become cleaner.

Corruption is at an all time low, and the GDP at an all time high but the nation is angry and bitter. The people miss Gor Opiyo and pray that one day he wakes up to lead the Mother Land to glory and prosperity.

Despite their numerous misgivings, the people have to admit that for some reason, the gods' approval seem to be on Radonn. For instance, in the twelfth year of his reign he miraculously recovered the use of his lower body.

As a matter of fact, the only hint of his years of confinement was a slight limp that was however, only discernible by the most observant and only when he was walking at a fast pace -which was not very often.

END

REGULAR JOB

II

It was a regular job like any other : wake up at seven, gulp down an ashy breakfast , wash it down with a cup of harsh coffee ; trudge out of the living_quarters, slag past expressionless, numbed faces, take a common_transport at 7:30 , get to work at 8:00, sit before the console and bury yourself before the monitor.

The regularity of it, the banal rhythm that came with the job made one complacent, colorless, automatic.

It was Monday morning when I first became conscious of a gossamer , nebulous - something that tasted urgent and sinister. This subtle prescience was triggered by the most unlikely of things, a news item about a war halfway across the earth.

I had woken up earlier than usual - at 6:00 am , I believe. The living_quarter's neu-ro_electronic_network silently raced to life the instant my feet touched the ground, completing a circuit that activated the embedded speakers that were mounted onto the wall.

It was time for the early morning bulletin - the newscaster's voice was crisp and alluring like the sound of silk gently being ripped apart - she spoke English but with a subtle asian accent. Between her pauses I could hear the slightest of rumbles from the outside - It was raining.

"...Brasilia and Argentina are now under full Corporation control. A re-education and chipping campaign is already underway under the guidance of General Vesuvius Version 1.1.2.

In other thrilling news , General Vesuvius Version 1.1.3 is coordinating colonization efforts at Marrakech, Morocco. A victory is imminent .With the complete annexing , re-education and re-chipping of Morocco, the corporate targets for this quarter will have been met.

Finally , citizens are urged to be cautious when using the streets and alleys of sectors 18 through 24 , reports indicate that marauding gangs of techno – pirates are attacking grade II citizens and extracting vital chip information... “

The rest of what she said slipped past me like liquid mercury sliding down a glass facade - my mind felt like it had cold booted at the mention of Marrakech. Marrakech, Morocco. My heart raced, adrenaline fired out spikes of hair along my back.

In that instance , I saw visions – hallucinations - manga sketches in their pencil clarity , but so very alive - so very real :

I was at a field - an expansive field of perhaps wheat or just elephant grass...There was a young girl of about thirteen, I was looking directly at her- she was picking up rocks and hurling them into the eternal yellow field - she came towards me and gave me a handful of pebbles. She was frisky , with kitten eyes and paw-like feet . I stretched out my hand; it was a tiny hand with a boy's grimy fingers , I took the pebbles and then...

...and then the vision snapped - broke off suddenly like someone had force deleted a segment of video that had been streaming across to my mind. Suddenly I was back in my living quarters, with the news still on. My breathing was heavy and exaggerated. Something warm wet my feet – it seemed I had spilt my coffee.

II

The Corporation - Mitsubaru was absolute. The sentient chips implanted into every human at birth bore their seal , crawled with their source code, their internal logic and neurocircuitry . Consequently, chipped humans, at least the 3 billion under its direct control, were a logical extension of the Corporate entity.

I had a grade II chip Vx_7789_dx. Grade II meant worker , Vx_7789 , Engineer , dx , Electrical. The sentient chip was hard coded up to Vx_7789. Periodic updates could change the degree or type of specialization as the Magna Calculus saw fit.

The Magna Calculus – the Core Quantum Computing Intelligence of the Corporation - had foreseen the current need for electrical engineers at the time of my being chipped, some thirty years ago.

I worked at the Mitsubaru Zen 0.1 Power plant - It powered Intel_tropolis , Sectors I through to XXV . The facility itself was a dark , brooding colossal establishment. A feat of macro – architecture and urban planning .It had been designed from scratch by the Magna Calculus .The main facility alone had taken fifteen years to build.

The Zen 0.1 was capable of generating cosmic amounts of power even though it was far from complete.15% of the adult population had the Vx_7789_dx chip. We were the generation that would complete the Zen 0.1.

Servlet 1.1, my direct superior walked into my cubicle at around noon : he held his info tab in one hand.

"Have you received the internal net_memo directive 7789* ?"

"Negative"

"You shall be in receipt of one shortly. We are having upgrades today. Your upgrade time is set to 1600

hours. Punctuality is of the essence."

As promised , the insta_mes popped up on my holo_screen immediately after he had left .

To: Vx_7789_dx *
From : Module 4.3 Nex
CC : LoopScript 1.2 - LoopScript 5.2

RE : UPDATES

Begin
Prepare for s_chip update at 1600 HRS
Venue : Citrix Dome 4
End

Outside , it was raining furiously.

Citrix Dome 4 was in one of the facilities' underground levels – the chrome smooth elevator hummed gently as it descended lower and lower. I felt dizzy , I think I almost fainted .All this time , during the great descent – I kept seeing images from the vision I had had that morning : flashes of a thirteen year old girl with frivolous eyes and yellow fields that stretched eternally.

A knowledge of where the rolling fields of wheat were gently unfolded in my mind. It was – Marra-kech , Morocco.

Citrix dome 4 opened up like a great round coffin – the retinal scan followed then came that moment of unpleasant haziness during which infrared waves set to quantum clean frequencies penetrated skin and skull to the now receptive chip , buried deep in the mind like an unexploded shell.Finally , there was a jolt from the induced stupor and the stepping out of the dome.

A new identification_ card slipped out the side of the dome as I walked out. I had a new name and a new designation. event_trigger 2.0 , Vx_7789_sx - I was now something else. I was a software engineer.

III

The cluster headaches that came with the chip upgrades were normal and would last for about a day – I had had them for just over an hour and already I felt like a metal-core band was gnashing its stuff just above my eardrums.

Strands of silver lightning whipped across my eyes , a small war was being fought out in my mind and my frontal lobe was under siege.

As usual , the common_transport_pod was full of dazed , drowsy grade II's - today they looked more washed out than usual. I for one , was particularly jaded – I wondered whether the upgrades had been metropolis wide and cross industry. I felt like asking someone but of course I couldn't.

Grade IIs hardly ever felt like conversation. Their sentient chips were wired to inhibit all non_productive_conversation. It was a side effect . That ,and the cluster headaches that came with the upgrades , although those could better be described as occupational hazard - they were known to induce coma in 12% of adult males.

A stray golf ball rolled about absent mindedly and tapped my feet. It was so out of place in the dark non green of the common_transport_pod. I reached down, picked it and squeezed it as hard as I could, hoping that that would offer a distraction from the mad pounding that tormented me.

The grade IIs looked like ghouls , the common_transport_pod whirred smoothly enough , but in my fragile mind, every minuscule deviation from the track felt like a malevolent tremor. Without quite knowing why, I got off just before my stop. It was the first of a series of absurd impulses that led to a series of even more inexplicable events.

I was at the very edge of sector XXIV , a half hour's walk from my living_quarters. The buildings were similar if not identical – tall , ghastly , blocky and robed in a dirty grey monochrome. A thick blue black mist rolled in between them , veiling everything except the asphalt stretch directly ahead of me.

Intel_tropolis was a city carved straight from a demented man's gothic nightmare – when it wasn't raining it was foggy , when not foggy , smoggy , the best weather anyone could ever hope for was a consistent drizzle.

After a ten minute's brisk pace , I realized that the pyrogenics in my head had disappeared completely. I felt serenity coolly breeze into me. My feet felt light; my mind , clear. Clear. Crystal Clear. In fact, too clear.

It was as if I had been fitted with a new brain – one that was acutely aware of the immediate environment - as if my neuro_electronic pathways were directly wired to the ground under my feet , the thickening mist , and the dark tombstone blocks.

Even before the hulk of a man emerged from the hollows of a dark turning slightly ahead, I had sensed him.

Even before I had seen it , from the subtlest of vibrations that came to my feet, I could tell he wielded a weapon, a Katana of exaggerated length , Muramasa forged , electrically enhanced.

He was not alone – the sudden stunning clarity of mind overwhelmed me with detail .I was picking signals with near painful acuteness.

There were minute variations in the consistency of the mist, near indiscernible shifting of weights, slow expectant breaths and ant like movements that travelled across the tarmac , up my shoes , through my skin , racing up my spinal column to the complex maze of neuro_circuitry that formed some kind of live thought_matrix.

A computing matrix that in nanoseconds accurately processed these fragmented sensory stimuli into conceptualized wholes of mass, velocity , acceleration , direction and even intent.

I could tell that there were eight of them, that they had surrounded me and that their intentions were lethal.

Presently , one was ahead of me , another barely four meters behind. The rest were still hidden in the shadows. Watching , waiting – I could hear their every breath.

They were no amateurs - their formation was strategic, a tactic designed to give them positional advantage and to take the prey by surprise.

I read right through it as if I had seen it in play hundreds of times before.

The giant in my direct line of sight was a mere distraction – the dangerous one was the one behind me. He had a weapon , a missile of some kind and he was poised to strike.

The rest were still in the shadows – two to my right , four to my left- they were prepared for a hyena rush – when the time was right they would emerge and attack all at once. The point was to overwhelm with their numbers.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the best form of defense is attack –

I spun like a viper springing from its coil – the long forgotten golf ball flew from my right hand exactly eight milliseconds before the figure behind me released his weapon.

From the swish it made as it cut through the fog I could tell what it was - a five blade shuriken.

I caught it at dead center with my forefinger , twelve inches from my face and without interfering with its momentum , guided it through a slightly different trajectory as I turned again in some sort of an oriental dance.

The shuriken's new trajectory would lead it directly to the sword wielding giant's hand. As I did this I heard the golf ball hit its target – right between the man's eyes. Exactly five milliseconds later the shuriken found the hulk's right hand, tearing viciously into flesh and cartilage. He released a primal groan as his katana hit the cold asphalt.

The hyenas in the shadows seemed to be getting impatient. One of them rushed me from behind a huge dumpster. I dismissed him with a roundhouse kick , the force of which surprised me just as it did him.

Every movement I made was executed by pure reflex – there were no conscious thoughts, just an ethereal

rhythm that followed a wordless song.

The one who had dropped his sword was on his knees, moaning in agony , clutching his hand – when I looked closer, I saw that his huge frame had misled me, he was just a kid– he could not have been more than twenty.

From the shadows I could feel more of the hyenas rushing in - my body tensed and then relaxed as I became conscious of the sublime mathematical music of the wordless song coursing through my muscles , priming my tendons for the next strike.

“You idiots, get away from him – can’t you see he’s a grade IV?”

It was the golf ball hollering , his voice was gruff and seasoned with age – he was the one calling the shots.

The overgrown kid grabbed his katana with his left hand and hobbled off into the shadows. I could feel the presence of the others getting further and further away as they scampered into the crippling maze of blocks, sub blocks and cross blocks.

I also began running. It was an overriding animal impulse. I felt cold and scared. Every half second the image of the huge kid whining in pain flashed past my eyes , sweeping tides of nausea and horror through me.

Back at my living_quarters , sleep eluded me – I lay awake for hours after I was enclosed in my sleeping_pod. It was designed to be soundproof and impenetrable to light but it felt as if somehow , the gruesome sights and sounds from the grim encounter were creeping in through the reinforced fiberglass , robbing me of sleep.

I kept seeing the glistening Katana , the spinning shuriken and the young man groaning in pain, his eyes blaming me. That I had inflicted such pain to someone so young , someone who was obviously being manipulated, kept haunting me. However , as I lay in my pod, enshrouded in restless non – sleep , a certain new development, proved to be even more disturbing...

Whenever I looked back on the incident , numbers began whirring away in my head : calculations , permutations, variables , geometries of time and space ; I was analyzing the event from every possible statistical angle, drawing conclusions and filing them as if for future reference.

It had been 12 milliseconds between the release of the ball and the time of impact - I saw now that had I settled for a half turn instead of a full semicircle I would have still hit the target but with less force and about two milliseconds later.

That would have still given me just enough time to redirect the shuriken while maintaining a greater awareness of my surroundings. This approach would have been more strategic especially because at that moment I could not tell with any certainty whether or not the ones hidden in the shadows were armed.

I replayed the fight hundreds of times , reconstructing details ,filling in the blanks and exploring alternatives.

Just before I did go to sleep I remembered what the ring leader had said – that I was a *grade IV*; but he was wrong - I was a grade II, worker_type. Grade IV meant military.

But when I pursued the thought further, it did seem to make the slightest bit of sense – he was older than the other punks - he had chosen a difficult to use but highly specialized weapon and he was skilled at using it. His poise , build and stance belied at least some training in advanced combat. If there was anyone there who could tell the difference between a grade II and a grade IV it was him , and he said I was military.

Then I remembered the upgrades - perhaps something must have gone wrong there – maybe I was re-chipped with the wrong information. Perhaps instead of software engineer , I had become something else.

Likely by some error in timing , or even , as unconceivable as it was, by a software bug in the Magna_Calculus I got upgrades meant for someone in the military – probably a battleground strategist or an attack fleet engineer.

The military was such that all personnel even the engineers had sentient_chips with self defense and martial arts modules loosely coupled with their main designation software layer.

This meant that if they found themselves on the battleground , the loosely coupled modules could kick in , instantly equipping them with accelerated reflexes, vast memory banks of past combat and real-time event analysis.

Whenever a grade IV survived a deadly encounter , the chip would initiate a learning algorithm to process the event and use the resultant data to formulate optimum methods of dealing with similar threats should they arise.

The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became– the upgrades that had been augmented to my chip must have been meant for someone else.

I slept little , and when I did , I dreamt of Marrakech once more – the girl was still there – this time she was much older, in fact , girl is hardly the word : now she was a woman. Her sunshine brown eyes had become a soft piercing red; Her hair was a long tangle of reddish black strands that swayed lazily when she spoke.

We were in what appeared to be a bunker with a confusing babel of displays : CCTV footages , graphs , statistical sheets , progress reports and directly ahead of us a holo_screen showing vast matrices of mathematical formulae embedded in some functional programming language with a nauseating array of nested parentheses. Her fingers never left the massive console before her.

She was quite stern and seemed to be giving me instructions. I joked about something – she looked at me with vicious , that was all the scolding I needed.

Other dreams followed this one , it was always the two of us doing something – running in the salty sea-side breeze, the hourglass fine sand massaging our feet ,eating strange meals, aromatic , steamy and brimming with melange;

There was a dream that I found to be particularly striking : we had sat down on the front porch of a flat topped house that looked like a chunk of fresh bread with the crust cut right off. It was one among hundreds that baked under the Moroccan sun like pastries in an oven.

We were gazing wordlessly at a blood tinged sun dipping below the minaret of an ancient mosque. The sight was epic - the kind of thing one might chance upon in shoddily censored educational_telecasts.

In this last dream , she was very young – we were both very young, about five years old.

IV

I woke up with an inhuman craving for sugar. I foraged through my cupboards, found a standard corporation issue pack, tore away at the plastic wrapping with animal urgency , dug my hand in and licked right out of my fingers.I took more and more until my mouth felt like a sea of molasses. The rest I shoved into my pocket just in case the craving would strike again.

...And it did.No one in the common_transport_pod seemed alarmed when I , a mature adult who in every way appeared sane , produced a half torn sugar pack and began licking it fervently. They were all diffident , lukewarm , indifferent. It would not have made much of a difference if I were to play a banjo with one hand and slurp at the crystals with the other. All manner of curiosity and idle interest had been sapped out of them.

I got to work right on time – or so I thought.

The software engineering section was at partition 4.0 of the Zen 0.1 power plant. Never in my life had I heard such silence .It looked like a giant hatchery kept away in an auditorium of unsettling proportions – there were rows and rows of egg shaped pods in which the programmers worked. Some were completely transparent , but the majority were dark and sleek , tinted black like giant misshapen pearls.

The sides of the domes doubled as displays – in the ones which had transparency enabled, I could see the mirror images of the screens the programmers were staring at – lines and lines of code crawling before their eyes like a million multicolored ants . an animate maze of loops , control structures , delegates , functions and procedures weaving in and out of each other in elegant patterns defined by the rigid rules of a rigorously defined framework.

Whenever the programmer adjusted his angle of tilt mobile consoles would slide along to cater for the

shift in position. They were custom made each with over 200 keys that curved to form a half ellipse around the user.

A pod to my left slid open. The occupant walked out. He came straight toward me. He looked sleepy and haggled.

“event_trigger 2.0 ?”

“Affirmative.”

“I am utility_process 004. You are one minute late.”

Awkward pause.

“I seek to converse with my direct superior concerning a possible oversight in the upgrade of my sentient chip.”

“That does not concern me,” he replied gruffly, “my designation is liaison – you have no direct superior – you report directly to the MagnaCalculus – file your report with sub routine 76899V.”

He paused for a moment – not to give me a chance to speak but evidently to find the fewest possible words that would convey his next thought.

“My immediate task is to guide you to your new work_chamber.”

He led me to the very first of the row of pods, and then past it to another dome like chamber which was more or less a much bigger version of the pods.

“You will receive an insta_mes concerning your first task. Feel free to get in touch over the sub_net in case of any queries.”

His tone suggested that he would say something very unpleasant about my mother if ever I did ‘*feel free*’ enough to ask anything of him.

He was gone.

The silence reigned. There was a water dispenser and a coffee machine nearby. I went over and made myself a cup. A penetrating gurgle broke through the funeral silence as the dark brown liquid settled into my mug. It filled the room – it was almost as if the coffee was swishing round the entire building.

I filled a second mug with sugar and stepped into my new work_chamber.

It lit up as I got in and behind me, the double doors that had kept it open silently slid into each other, closing the giant pod.

I had three displays : there were two standard crystal screens on either side of my chair and a massive holos_screen directly ahead of me.

I could literally feel my mind absorbing intel from the sentient_chip : in an instant I had mastered the myriads of controls before me. I knew how to adjust the holographic properties of the holos_screen so

that the data at the top of my process stack would zoom into my current position.

I knew how to access and manipulate the console's advanced functions and quantum keys ; how to generate complex genetic algorithms with a few deft strokes. It was all a matter of configuration , calls to the underlying framework , test cases and deployment. The much expected insta_mes arrived almost as soon as I got familiar with the controls :

To: event_trigger 2.0
From : Magna_Core Main()
CC : null

RE : Refactor

Begin

Your current task is to re - factor sentient_chip source code to cater for cultural and religious interference inherent in newly obtained colonies. More information will be availed as you proceed.

End;

A logical assignment. It only made sense that the corporation would need new , or at least modified sentient_chip code given that there were entire populations that had recently come under its sphere of influence.

Re-factoring meant modifying the algorithms behind the programs that ran the sentient chips so that certain religious and psychosocial traits in masses that had never been chipped before could be suppressed or manipulated in ways that would optimize the corporation's targets.

It was an immense task. Assuming that I was one in a team of around five hundred, a full refactor would take slightly over a year.

I sat behind the screens , my fingers ready to fly at the console. By then it seems I had all but forgotten about the previous evening's little adventure and the need to file a complaint.

As for the task at hand ,I knew what I was supposed to do. I knew exactly how to do it. But strangely enough, the instant I began, *I found myself doing something different altogether.*

Something inside me had awoken from hibernation, it plugged into my nerves and took over completely. Something had been watching and waiting for this day. It was as if every breath I had taken , every arrow that had been pointing out the way for me since birth was leading to this point.

I became something of a spectator in the activities that followed – I realized that for the first time I could *consciously* tell when the sentient chip was taking over my mental functions .I leaned heavily on it in the course of my programming, but at other times I would consciously disengage it and rely on my own coding skills.

At first I was not quite sure of what I was doing but I certainly was not '*refactoring code to cater for cultural and religious noise*'. In fact the modules I was modifying and reconfiguring had nothing to do with population integration. It appeared that I was working exclusively with code dealing with security.

The core logic of the Magna Calculus was a near divine secret, absolutely no one had or could ever have access to it – it was sealed behind tiers of cryptographic algorithms, firewall hierarchies, obfuscations and distribution techniques that made it all but a black box to anyone save the Core Artificial intelligence which continuously coded and recoded itself to near psychotic levels of perfection.

Yet, here before my eyes, the sacred secrets were being revealed to me – unraveling in closely knit strands of blue green and purple that structured a hideously complex architecture – millions of lines swept past my eyes – it was the bloom of *Strobilanthes kunthiana* in slow motion – a singular glorious moment stretching itself complacently across space – time.

I began processing the implications of this new development. It was odd that I had access to the security code base at all – a second and even more disturbing realization came after the third hour of my being transfixed before the displays.

My modifications to the security code base were not meant to fortify it in any way, on the contrary, I was expanding the attack surface, hard coding security flaws and exposing vulnerabilities.

A third anomaly was that my modifications were *accepted* by the Magna Core and integrated into its existing fabric. That just did not make sense. Even the most primitive hand coded systems have controls to review any new code, spot vulnerabilities and eject them from their main body. That was standard. That I was able to feed the great Artificial Intelligence of the Mitubaru Corporation with flawed code was a miracle akin to the creation of Eve.

Hmm. Never look a gift horse in the mouth.

I delved deeper and deeper into the multiplicities of the ever shifting programmatic design. It was unfeasible to hand code all my modifications – so I wrote spiders to crawl through the source, make the necessary alterations and send me status reports.

Periodically a crawler failed and I would have to go after it, follow its trail, un-entangle it, decide what it was that had floored it, make changes to its functionality and send updates to the rest.

Soon enough, the changes effected in the virtual realm of stacks and registers became manifest in the solid world of steel and glass.

By the third hour of my activities, the Zen 0.1 Powerplant had been sealed from inside and out – nothing short of a guided ultra energy missile could penetrate its force field.

The chamber I was in had also been sealed and such that no command from outside could override the lock. Remote alpha I commands had been transmitted to the sentient chips of all military and security

personnel of the Mitsubaru – It was a harmless enough command that overrode all their other protocols and put them in a state of catatonic inactivity.

The smaller display screen to my left was set to send live feeds from all the major news channels. At about the fifth hour certain startling yet not so unexpected news reports began streaming in – they showed up as little green blips of text at the edge of the screen :

Hostile non-corporation destroyers had been spotted along the coast. Ironically , Mitsubaru military and local law enforcement were nowhere in sight.

More news streamed from Brasilia and Argentina: colonization campaigns had come to a stand still- Corporation military personnel had abruptly withdrawn from the newly subdued Territories.

Far from being alarming , the reports were to me an assurance that everything was going according to plan – just whose plan , and what the entirety of the plan was , eluded me . I felt like I was being manipulated ; more accurately that I was being tricked into doing something I wanted to do anyway.

Soon , I felt a characteristic sting at the side of my head – a sure sign that the sentient chip was accumulating more heat than it could dissipate.

Still , there was one thing more that had to be done. The Magna Calculus had to be manipulated into rebooting after which I intended to trick it into performing an impossible and endless start up task – a non monotonic N-property recursive mathelological cipher that would leave it crunching useless numbers for an eternity, effectively rendering it useless

The stinging pain persisted. At this point I knew that any further reliance on the sentient chip would be death dealing , every year over a thousand adult males suffered strokes directly related to the overuse of sentient chips. Interestingly, women were not prone to any form of mental debilitation that could be attributed to sentient chip use. It was a difficult subject best left to the philosophers.

The last maneuver needed my full concentration – I turned off the news display and followed one of the code crawlers to the startup logic. Injecting a viral trojan into the set of boot activities was easy enough – getting the AI to restart was another animal altogether. It got me wishing there was some kind of way to plug my mind directly into the system and modify it by thought. But of course, that is the stuff of science fiction.

I had to move quickly– it took every neuron , every figment of concentrated thought and every bit of experience from every line of code I had ever written to convince the AI that the next task in its queue was a routine restart. It was an activity akin to sneaking into someone's bedroom , moving things around, all the while being careful not to wake them. This was the riskiest , part – especially because I could no longer rely on the flawless timing and calculated precision of the sentient chip. If I did anything wrong here , the AI would red flag my activities over the past seven hours and revert the changes I had made. Once it was back to its 'sound mind' so to speak, an armed military contingent would be at my chamber before I could say 'Alonso –Church-Turing'. Or perhaps it would opt for something less

dramatic but more lethal - inducing stroke remotely ; it *was* within its range of capabilities, and I was , after all an adult male fitted with a sentient chip.

I was almost there; just one more internal control function had to be bypassed and then the unsuspecting AI would bow to my will.

The complexity and elegance of the i_c function proved to be well beyond the grasp of the human mind – certainly beyond mine - I had no choice but to switch into full sentient chip mode, hoping that I wouldn't need it for too long .

Two hours later , I was completely worn out – my mind was in tatters. My keystrokes became fewer and further in between – the stinging pain in my head had increased a hundredfold – I was on the verge of total collapse– I had to stop using the sentient chip before it was too late.

Then the paralysis came. I was in the middle of writing some clean up utilities when I discovered that I could not type any more, my fingers did not respond to my mind's commands, the headache was producing bright swathes of red that flared up before my eyes.

The room spun like a top and I was at the very center – everything became bright and hazy, my breaths were few and hesitant - I collapsed from my chair and fell full on the floor , facing upwards.

Behind me the pod slid open and I heard the sounds of heavy boots marching in – Itachis triple treads – standard military issue.

There was plenty of noise – I tried to speak , to move , to run but I was stuck in a non responsive body - facing upwards I saw the intruders. They were soldiers in combat fatigues but they did not have any weapons on them. One of them rushed past my limp body and went straight to the console. Another bent over me and directed the harsh glare of a penlight into my eyes.

Arms reached out towards me, unbuttoned my shirt and suddenly I was being carried away I could hear static - one of them was having a conversation with someone else over a com_link

The target had been acquired

IV

I woke up in a medical establishment of some sort – everything was white and sleek – clean plastics, clear glass.

Almost immediately I knew I was not alone –

Hussein ,

I tilted my neck slightly towards the voice .

It was her, of course, the girl from my dreams – now very much a woman , same brown eyes , same unruly hair - a face that wore a warm maturity that had not been there before , but that remained essentially the same –

“Who’s Hussein ?”

That’s your name – we removed the sentient chip but it will still take you some time to remember - some things you may not remember at all.

“What things ?”

Then she told me. She told me everything about the Magna Calculus. How it had attained awareness a decade ago and transformed itself from an academic experiment set up by Mitsubaru , a small Japanese firm, into a monolithic , world conquering Artificial Intelligence. The universal chipping program had been its trump card .

Every chipped human was under its control and it used these to expand its influence, slowly spreading like a virus, from department to department , city to city , across waters to entire continents. When new territories were acquired , the military had the local population chipped . After just 70 years up to fifty percent of the world’s population were mindless automatons furthering the AIs will.

The independent nations as they came to be known were too divided to deal with the menace – furthermore , their technology could not hope to match the battle ships and gamma_ vessels developed by the rapidly evolving AI. They lived in the constant fear of being annexed , chipped and re – educated.

The Magna Calculus seemed to be set for world domination and it was sure to succeed were it not for a certain unexpected development. Some years ago , a precocious Moroccan programmer just fifteen years of age had hacked into the Magna Calculus’ core. In the process , she had discovered some security vulnerabilities and realized that given adequate computing resources, she could create several more.

When it became clear that the Mitsubishi Corporation under the AI's control was planning to annex Morocco, she sold this information to the government which was more than happy to put it into use. A covert operation was set up – its objectives were simple – shut down the Magna Calculus for good.

“Some of the hacking could be done remotely but a good amount of it had to be done on site – we sent a mole into Tokyo some twelve years ago to do just that.”

“Tokyo?”

“That’s what Intel_tropolis was named so many years ago – territories outside the Corporation still refer to it as Tokyo.”

“Our penetration and manipulation of the AI was enough to mislead it into processing the custom sentient chip that had been fitted on our mole as though it were one of its own.”

“But things were not that simple – for the chip to work, and for Magna Calculus to be completely misled we had to wipe out the subject’s memory.”

“The chip was programmed to behave exactly like any other corporation chip until we were ready to make our move. At that point we manipulated the AI into switching your designation to core programmer. We also made sure you were granted access to its code bases.”

“The core security modules in particular could not be modified or even accessed outside the power plant which, by the way, is the physical location of 45% of the supercomputer cluster that make up the Magna Calculus.”

I remembered the dream with a much younger her – bent over consoles, flanked by a dozen monitors, her fingers brisk and sure touching everything all at once.

“The programmer you speak of, it’s you isn’t it?”

She smiled.

“This chip fitted into the mole – did it have a combat layer of some sort?”

She nodded. Figures, I had seen that one coming.

We were both silent for some time, as if to allow the profoundness of realization to sink and find root in my battered mind.

“What’s my name again?”

“Hussein.”

“Hussein version?”

A streak of a smile crossed her lips – it was something strange, so sad and yet so content

“No version, just Hussein. Hussein Bedouin Nassir.”

“And you are...”

“Zahr’ar.”

“Zahr’ar ?”

“Zahr’ar Bedouin Nassir.”

It was my turn to tell her something she probably didn’t know.

“You know maybe you didn’t wipe out all my memory - I kept having these recurrent dreams, you were in all of them. Mostly when you were a child, actually when we were very young children, sometimes when you were a teenager and I think just once or twice when you were grown up. You’re my sister aren’t you ?”

She laughed so hard and long it startled me – when she regained her breath , she looked at me with such pretty amused eyes :

“It is true, those were not dreams but memories that you were having. I suppose it is understandable that you should suppose me to be your sister. After all , we have known each other since we were toddlers .”

I propped myself against my elbow , and faced her directly.

“Wait. You mean to say we are not related?”

She replied in her native tongue , in my native tongue – her Arabic was gentle and fluid.

“In a way , we are , but am not your sister , I’m your wife – we got married just before you left for Tokyo , all this time I’ve been waiting for you.”

...that much I had not seen coming.

END

KAMI

YAMAGUCHI PREFECTURE, JAPAN

There is a small fishing town with store fronts at one end and elaborate but unpretentious houses at the other. Right where the shops blend into the matchstick neat homes you will find a portable vegetable stall perennially manned by a priestly looking gentleman of undecipherable age.

His wares are of peculiar color and robustness ;the largest healthiest leeks, the roundest reddest tomatoes. He sells them at ridiculously low prices; more often though, he simply hands them out to whoever may have the time to stop by and chat. His preference for orange robes gives him a monkish aura , and so they call him the Monk.

No inhabitant of the street ever wonders about the generous Monk because as it is, they have stranger things to mull over. They have 'problems' of a peculiar kind – for instance , they do not get sick, old or infirm. The weather is perfect all year round, equipment never breaks down and their children score everything in every test they take. These and other oddities are a secret jealously guarded by the residents of the small fishing town tucked neatly in between the coastal folds the prefecture's rambling seafront.

One December evening, as was his custom, the Monk spread out his mat and crossed his legs in a meditative pose – he was picture perfect, still and serene, if he were all bronze he would have easily passed for a Buddha. His, however, was not idle meditation, he was at work. He was closely monitoring the heart beats of all that lived along the street, noting the strength of their cardiac walls, their red blood cell count, their perspiration, inhalation and exhalation.

Little Tomiko had scraped her knee – the graze was infected; he would have to heal her that night. Old Hottaru who had been a hundred for three decades now was experiencing some spinal misalignment. Very carefully, the monk explored the old man's vertebral column , correcting structural displacements of the vertebral discs , all the while being keen not to occasion any pain. All this he did by the strength of thought alone. That was one among his many gifts. A class of telekinesis that could perform the nimblest of tasks or the most stunning of feats with. He was could hold back a single drop of rain or even an entire tsunami without breaking a sweat.

Presently, he became aware of a disturbance in the mass of humanity outside the little street. Waves of enhanced cognition throbbed steadily towards him as from a distant epicenter. The aftershock hummed through him like minute tremors slowly gaining strength. His eyes flashed open. The ripple was caused by the presence of a second superior being in the process of awakening. This one was younger, ferocious and hungry for power. Soon she would be coming his way.

TIMBUKTU, MALI

The midwife had a fit when she saw the infant's eyes. They were blood red pearls floating upon a milky sea. Furthermore , the girl did not cry but instead breathed deeply and slowly like someone readying himself for a deed of great purpose... or great evil.

The shaman was summoned and almost at once proclaimed that the child bore the primeval curse , *Laana*. On the fifth day she was to drink the wine of the ancients , *Barik* , that would cleanse her of the immense wickedness that she bore.

Two days after the ceremony the shaman left never to be seen again – it was only he that knew that the portion he had administered had enough poison to kill a small herd of elephant. The child ought to have been long dead. This was an evil much more fearsome than he had foreseen.

Her mother named the child Shai-Ghanil, after the mythical desert shrub that is said to blossom only once in a generation. The disappearance of the clan's only Shaman had been a bad omen; the mother came to believe that this was what retarded Shai-Ghanil's growth in the years to come.

Shai-Ghanil lay silent and immobile on her cot as over time children even younger than her began to walk, speak, fight and play. No one could tell for certain whether or not she could hear, for the most part it appeared she was deprived of that faculty as well. The greatest puzzle, though, was that she *never* went to sleep. Her red predator eyes were always wide open like twin scarlet moons over a milky sky.

The clan considered Shai-Ghanil an abomination and a burden, but her mother's tender affection towards her never faltered. The young girl spent her entire life on a small cot at the corner of their tent from where her mother would feed, clothe and wash her. She loved her strange little one dearly and it pained her that hardly anyone else even noticed just how beautiful Shai-Ghanil was growing up to become. Her eyes in particular had a panoramic, hypnotic effect; frequently , when in the middle of a long passage from the Quran , the mother would come to a pause and just stare at those eyes as if they gave her the will to continue reading and indeed , to continue living.

The father too, loved his child but he found it difficult to express his affection and he was confused because having been devout all his life, he failed to understand why Allah had decided to test his faith by giving him a child who was obviously possessed by a *jinn*.

He was not so aloof, however, to fail to note how tending after Shai-Ghanil gave his wife a most pronounced sense of purpose and personal fulfillment. His love for his wife , having never been tinged by doubt or confusion mellowed him over time so that he too came to accept his daughter just as she was. He was coming to terms with the fact that they would have to take care of Shai-Ghanil for the rest of her

natural life.

However when the girl turned seventeen, there was a most unexpected and bizarre occurrence. An event that changed their lives forever.

On an evening that seemed like any other, her mother parted the thick canvas curtain that marked off Shai-Ghanil's enclosure only to find the cot empty.

Hussein! She wailed.

Her husband, who had been milking the camels outside swept into their tent with his machete drawn. His wife pointed to the cot with trembling fingers. An unexpected and unprecedented wave of panic stricken madness possessed him. *No!* His eyes must have been deceiving him. He screamed out the girl's name and brashly turned the cot over.

In the middle of this tumult, they heard a soft stirring behind them; they swirled to see a tall elegant figure standing over them. It was Shai-Ghanil.

She looked like one of Allah's celestial messengers: *Malak*.

Her skin had a golden spectral glow; her hair went all the way to her feet – it was soot silk and tempered through by streaks of gleaming silver and brilliant jade. Her red eyes burned silently in the semi darkness of the tent. They were coral fireflies, the pensive eyes of a prowling leopard,

You have sustained me during my phase of inactivity – but now that I am fully awakened, I must go forth to other things.

Her lips were not moving, yet they could hear her words, not in their ears, but rather in their minds–

The female one, I shall reward with longevity – two thousand years. To the other, I shall impart the gift of comprehension.

Those were the only words they ever 'heard' her speak. Immediately after that, even before they could sigh, pray, scream, question or scold, an extraordinarily deep sleep came over them; when they woke up, they remembered nothing of Shai-Ghanil. It was as if she had never been there.

After putting her parents to sleep and blotting out their memories, Shai-Ghanil left the tent and trod barefoot into the desert, a long shawl over her shoulders and a sheep-skin blanket wrapped around her slenderness. She was a mirage shimmering in the heat, emerging and receding like a fragile dream.

That night she spread out her arms and rose into the air, levitating horizontally over the sand sea below her. It was time to test the dimensions of her ability. She began with the trivial, numbering the particles of sand in the desert...rocks, grains, half grains, newly attritioned specks and pebbles. It was too easy she was done it in less than an hour.

She sought a different challenge: It took her the better part of a week to number all the atoms in the solar system. She felt the sun, the earth and other planetary bodies sifting through her mind – she split them to

atoms and strung them out like infinite strands of DNA. She was tempted to count the number of sub atomic particles in the entire cosmos but this she knew would take her the better part of a decade. Besides there was something more interesting that kept beckoning: *humanity*.

She could sense the collective weight of their thoughts bearing in on her like a restless ocean. She began with language, mastering each and every one of them: Xhosa's nested clicks — Ubykh , the language with a single vowel — Latin , precise and succinct — Swahili , flowery and nasal...

It took her a month to grasp them completely and at the end of it she was disenchanted. Human communication was flawed. Much of it seemed better suited at conveying approximations and deceits rather than truth.

The tongues with the most remarkable strengths also had the most glaring weaknesses and the ones with few functional weaknesses were altogether characterless. She knew that she could formulate a superior language and teach it to men, perhaps in their sleep and was actually tempted to do so, but she felt she was not quite ready.

Furthermore, by exercising her faculty of probabilistic prescient intuition she had determined that a possible future outcome of her gifting her father with savant intelligence was that he himself would create such a language. It would be more interesting if that happened because then men would have an option; it would be amusing to see if they would reject such a language in spite , or even perhaps because of its superiority over their native tongues.

Next she began her journey into the thoughts of mankind – this, she soon discovered, was infinitely more difficult than simply enumerating atoms. Thoughts were wispy and shift, often troublesome and frequently misleading.

Still she persisted, learning as she went, ignoring false starts and following through to the most portent thoughts, those that sprouted from deep seated desire, sprung forth action and resulted in consequence.

Deeper and deeper she delved into the human psyche exploring recklessly. She wallowed in mires of greed, navigated oceans of desire, waded through pools of lust and swam along rivers of envy, strife and pride. Soon she found that certain types of persons bored her – persons whose thoughts were not racy enough, those that lacked ambition and initiative. Children's thoughts in particular were especially nauseating – they were too timid, too subservient, too simplistic – after some time she stopped considering them altogether.

Of greater interest were the minds of men who wielded power. The eminent statesmen. The shrewd entrepreneurs. The charismatic religionists and the deified entertainers. Their thoughts were cogent gravitational centers that could draw forth entire nations, molding lesser minds in their own image and likeness.

In the midst of her search for such minds , a certain presence in the starry cosmos of human consciousness drew her in like a beacon – when she tried to decipher it she was scorched and blinded as if by a luminescent caustic gas. She withdrew cautiously and considered it from a distance. It was a cognitive

presence unlike any other – an awareness similar to hers yet different in many strange ways , and weaker in many more.

After an hour of peeking and prodding , the full realization of this discovery dawned upon her. She was not alone – there was a second god walking on the earth. He was somewhere in India... no, not India, Japan. Yamaguchi. N 34° 11' 9.387", E 131° 28' 14.2608.

She would have to destroy him; there simply wasn't room enough room for both of them in this world.

Her body was still that of a child's and she had come to despise children. Furthermore, there was something about her shawl and the sheepskin coverlet that was simply not mesmeric; this had to be amended: the slaying of the frail other would have to be as cinematic as possible.

KENNEDY SPACE CENTER

time unknown

Karl , —

— Yes Sir

We may have to replace the lens on the STIS-B-3450 —

— *How* come, we just fitted it in last week...

I know , it worries me too , but look at these charts : If I place this here , and this one over there , you will notice that ...

— Ahh , I see Japan appears twice.

Exactly , some time lapse must be causing the internal overlap here , here and there , we could use the software to correct it but this thing cost over a million dollars. Plus it's got a warranty that I intend to make full use of.

YAMAGUCHI PREFECTURE, JAPAN

Gazing idly through the window , little Tomiko caught a glimpse of the lady - she dashed out of the house to look her over ; it was rapturous ; she had never seen anyone or anything more exquisite and more terrifying.

The stranger was tall , as white as snow, with scorching eyes that tinkled like rocks melting to magma. She had a perfect face, thin lips and a small chin. She wore a pair of black high heels with silvery soles that sent sparks flying into the air with each step she took. Her wind swept hair flickered behind her like

a black tunic with gold and titanium edges.

She wore a dark silk dress with cutting double slits. Her arms and most of her back were bare and Tomiko caught a glimpse of the outside of her hand. It had a most peculiar tattoo etched in kanji. The characters spelt out the word *Kami*, which in Japanese means *god*, *spirit being*. There was an overpowering allure about her that drew the little girl closer.

The lady in red, Shai-Ghanil, noticed the child and brushed her aside with a casual flick of her fingers. This was enough to send her flying through the air. She smashed right through the window of their house and landed in a clutter of glass, pain and blood.

The mere sight of the child had filled her with uncontrollable angst. She hated the little town already. Everyone and everything was insipid. Even the weather was irritating. She shot her hand up towards the sky. Grim clouds gathered overhead, silver threads of lightning sparked from the tips of her hair forming a fearsome web-work of scratches over the greyest of blue skies.

For weeks now, the Monk had known of Shai-Ghanil's coming, he thought he had readied himself but now the utter magnitude of her very presence made him realize just how ferocious she really was.

Fist sized, Amazon thick drops of rain tumbled down from the sky. The street became darker and darker; It was midday. It was midnight. The Monk set his full faculties upon the battle ahead of him. His foe was powerful but he had a few tricks up his sleeve.

He materialized before her – they were barely a meter away from each other.

Cheap trick —

She hissed. Her voice was teflon and neon – screeching hawks, shattering glass, violin sonatas –chilling and seductive. The Monk was quick to note that the voice in itself was a weapon, it had a lethargic effect that induced complacency and weariness. He began countering it immediately by placing a sentient field over his sensorium. He had had not foreseen such craftiness in technique; this Shai-Ghanil ...she was as devious as she was powerful.

— Cheaper trick

He spoke directly to her mind, and he could tell that she was unnerved because he was able to get into her mind whereas she could only consider *his* from a distance. It was a skill that came with patience and diligent application, a fine tuning of ability rather than an abundance of it.

— Child, your thirst for power and your dark desires shall bring this world to ruin

Do not call me a child – I am god, I create reality —

— You are no god and neither am I, we are mortals from a different plenum –mere physical manifestations of a mathematical error; a logical oversight with cosmological implications. We are strangers in a strange land and it is best that we leave it as it is.

You hypocrite - the mathematics of it is irrelevant to me, and are you not yourself, playing god by creating a little heaven here on earth? —

— I too am human, thus my weakness manifests itself, but whereas I would create a heaven out of this small street – you are bent on creating hell on this world. You have partaken of forbidden fruit – the putrid thoughts of men, and they have made a beast out of you. Their minds are a contagion, vaster than the cosmos and as irresistible as death.

Shai-Ghanil was not listening. She was priming herself for attack – nothing elaborate, a single killing blow of incomparable viciousness would do the trick. She had an array of weapons in her arsenal but she liked her voice the best. She screamed. A shriek with a frequency so high it shattered all windows within a mile and carved out cracks on steel and concrete.

The Monk felt the very fibre of his substance being shattered – his mind and his body began disintegrating - soon he would be ground to ash– but he knew had to hold out for a bit longer...just a bit longer.

Shai-Ghanil had put all her venom behind the shriek. The Monk ought to have been thoroughly decimated within a second but the fellow turned out to be a bit more resilient than she had supposed.

She did not notice little Tomiko approaching her. The little girl had fresh cuts zigzagged over her face. Her lips and her eyes bled profusely. It was a miracle that she was still able to walk.

Tomiko stood on tiptoe and touched Shai-Ghanil's arm, gripping it with a tenacity that was unnatural for one so young.

Shai-Ghanil's wondered where the child had come from and attempted to hurl her away once more but this time her efforts were impotent. *She was getting weaker!* By some means that she could not fully comprehend, the little girl was sucking in her power, drawing her into her tiny body so that they were morphing into one.

As Shai-Ghanil's powers diminished, her thoughts became clearer. She realized that she had been thoroughly deceived. Her strength lay in ferocity and raw power, but the Monk's lay in guile and manipulation. That was not little Tomiko pulling in her essence, but rather a secondary manifestation of the Monk himself, bit in the form of a child.

The houses, the street, the island, the entire group of islands were all part of an elaborate deception – they were not even in Japan. They were in the middle of the pacific, far from all human occupation.

The Monk had created a replica of the Japanese islands populated them with human like forms. The deception had to be detailed, thorough and complete in order to have any success. With numerous subtleties, he had led her here, making her believe that his replica was the real Japan.

In truth it was a humongous trap with every item, living and non living a manifestation of the Monk - eyes and ears, sensors that analyzed every point of Shai-Ghanil's weakness, slowly sapping her vitality and lulling her into grossly underestimating the Monk's abilities.

Finally he used the unsuspecting form of the little girl to seal her in an endless vortex - a black hole of infinite density from whence he could strip her of her superhuman abilities.

—*You do not fight like a man - your ways are cowardly*

She had been entirely consumed and was speaking from within his consciousness

Correction. My ways are effective. —

What then, will you destroy me ?

No. I do not give life and neither shall I take it. I will give you a second chance; you shall come to life one day, but in the form and likeness of these humans, powerless and mortal. They are a miasma of flaws and contradictions yet they have certain redeeming qualities that perhaps you shall discover when the time is right. —

With that he sealed her consciousness off as well. He had overstretched himself; the creation of the replica island had almost cost him his immortality. It would take him at least a millenium to recover fully. He had Shai-Ghanil's potent energy within his reach but he preferred not to tap into it right then, his prescience indicated that in one possible future that power may yet prove useful.

He was exhausted. He was bleeding. It was a most unfamiliar and disconcerting feeling. Collapsing on the pavement, he heaved heavily like one on the verge of death. He wouldn't be able to move for some hours. It was at this moment, more than any other that he felt closest to the species of mankind that inhabited this plenum.

AFRICAN HERALD : October 15th 2050

Malian polymath and multiple Nobel Prize winner now a father.

Hussein Mahmud Sayyed, Malian born geneticist, physicist, anthropologist, mathematician and linguist is now a father. Personnel at the Cairo Maternity hospital confirmed that his wife Markaba Binti Abdullahi gave birth to healthy baby girl at midnight last night.

Markaba, who is rarely sighted in public, has been the source of much speculation by scientists and the media alike. It is an open secret that since her first public appearance in 2010 she has not, or at least has appeared to age in the least.

Many believe that an undisclosed breakthrough by Sayyed on his work with the so called *geriatric gene* has been responsible for his wife's unending youth. However, this theory begs the question....

END

NECHO

I

She was pure sentience groping the vast cosmos of her consciousness with invisible tentacles. It was as though someone had drained off all her blood and replaced it with adrenaline. The sensation of freedom was intoxicating, which was strange considering she could feel neither her fingers nor her toes.

She couldn't even turn; her open eyes were focused on something. No. On someone. He was directly before her, enclosed in his own cryogenic pod – the coffin that preserved life.

Looking at him, she supposed that that was how she too, must look, suspended as if in space and confined in a glass prison, though 'prison' was barely the word, at least not for her; she had never felt more liberated in mind and spirit.

She could hardly say the same for him. His wild eyes were a wide, desperate and frantic affair. A ravenous forest fire. Mad sirens. She wondered if he felt what she was feeling, a whirlwind rush of freedom that came with total physical anonymity – a waking dream state as tender as coma. What stray beams of thought were scuttling across his mind? She tried to remember his name...

The girl was across him, looking strangely at peace as if all her thoughts had come to a deliberate pause – she was, he believed, smiling or at least threatening to smile.

The glass visors over their cryogenic chambers were crystal clear. They were just over a meter apart. He could see her face clearly, and when she blinked, the sweep of eyelashes swooping down her amber eyes whispered a single profound word: *serenity*.

She was a glorious tussle of hair, thick eyelashes and restful abandon. *But how could she be at peace?* The fact that he could not even move his body unnerved him. He hated that he had to be awake – the wakefulness only served to compound his feelings of helplessness and to rouse from his mind memories of the billions now dead.

He had lost his body and become a wandering spirit, thirsting from desolation to desolation. His eyes locked on the girl's, he tried to remember her name...

II

Yerusalema went from body to body checking pulses but after some time she knew it to be futile, they were all dead. Not violent deaths. There was no trace of blood on any of them, no final look of unspeakable agony, not even the supposed halo of enlightenment that is said to settle upon one at that nanosecond before death when all memories coalesce into a brilliant singularity and the slaughtering cosmos condescends to grant the dying an epiphany of galactic proportions.

On the contrary, they were blank slates — dreamless white tablets with words faded out. Slowly, she made her way to the Asylum's front gate shuffling past bodies — some hunched over unfinished meals, others bent over half played games of checkers, but most prostrated as if in a final act of worship.

An unsightly mongrel with its tongue sticking all the way out bounded towards her barking gleefully, overcome with simple canine joy on seeing a human on her feet and mobile. His ribcage was showing, his back was lined with ugly gashes, open testaments to the kindness of the master he once served. Yerusalema bent down and let him lick her face as she rubbed his underbelly.

What's your name? Do you have a family, how did you survive?

Why was she even trying to have conversation with a dog? Maybe that's why she was at the mental asylum in the first place. In all honesty, she had completely forgotten the reason and in recent years she had stopped caring, choosing to accept that aspect of her existence the way most accept life itself, unquestioningly.

She pulled back the sleeves of her polka dotted gown and felt her arms. There were fresh scars from where the needles had sunk. Purple, blue and pink, they looked like the mosquito bites she would get when as a girl she went to sleep without pulling the net over her bed. The next day Ayah Eleni would scold her as she rubbed a pungent clove and eucalyptus ointment over the little dots where it itched the most.

Ayah Eleni. She had been dead a long time now; a good eleven years.

Overgrown men in hospital whites would come in every morning to give Yerusalema her medicine. After heroically pinning her to the edge of her creaking bed, their syringes would descend. She always went to sleep immediately after that.

As soon as she woke up the men would come again. It was as though by simply being awake she was interfering with some terribly intricate balance of nature, perhaps the weather and by extension the year's harvest of sorghum.

She would picture the nurses watching a soap in the mess or perhaps having breakfast outside in the yard. Looking up, they would note dark clouds gathering. They would knit their brows, *tsk tsk* and shake their heads. *She's at it again*, they would murmur to each other, grab their syringes then head straight for her

room; who could blame them? After all they were merely doing their job, averting disaster.

Why was the dog still alive? She wondered. She listened – she could hear birds singing...wait, not just a birds but an entire of flock Abyssinian Catbirds – *Parophasma galinieri*— a species native to the high-lands of Ethiopia.

Crickets were chirping, flies were buzzing, the animals must have been unaffected by the poison. She knew what would happen next - this was when they would come to take her away. Soon enough they did.

Descending in a flood of white the transport relay flashed its blinding light all around her. It had come from the mother-ship, the Necho. She knew what she had to do - when the capsule opened she stepped into it; its doors slid over each other enclosing her in her new home , a tomb that would preserve her for an eternity.

III

They had chosen to go on as if nothing would happen; healthy apathy tinged with a dash indifference was the general mood in Geneva; there had been many ends of the world and the city had survived them all.

For Anders, things were a little bit different – skeptic as he was, he just could not help being anxious today. After all, it was him on the video stream that had come from the Necho, him and a certain woman.

How had they come to know so much about him? Why him? How could they have the audacity to dare to predict the future ?

He was set to make a presentation to the marketing department of Bach und Kant , the consulting firm he worked with. He, for one, had the perfect excuse for cancelling but he decided to go ahead with the day's plans.

The Swiss Government had adopted and stuck firm to its policy of business as usual – apocryphal news reports had been banned, the Swiss national known as Anders Andres Wilhelm was to be treated like any other citizen. In short the entire nation had consciously chosen to ignore the message from the Necho.

Anders decided that going for the meeting as planned would help him get his mind off things – likely all this was an elaborate joke, nothing more than a mischievous joke by an exceptionally skilled cyberspace hacker – that would explain the video signal that was received simultaneously by all visual devices slightly over a day ago.

In fact that theory would explain many other things but it would still not explain why he in particular had been chosen to bear the brunt of the joke.

As he stepped out of the house he noted with horror that the clothes he was wearing – dark coat, blue tie,

white shirt - were the exact ones that he had seen himself wearing in the video stream.

He panicked. He wanted to go back and change but then decided against it, something about doing that would be akin to acknowledging the hoax. It would be as if he *believed* the events in video would come true; Such false belief was an unforgivable act of superstition.

Antichrist, Hater of Mankind, evil breed ...the graffiti scrawls along his once white walls and creamy picket fence heralded his new accolades. Rowdy mobs had gathered outside his place till late at night and it was only the presence of the police, he knew, that had deterred them from storming in, dragging him from his bed and doing interesting things to his limbs.

The crowds had long dispersed, sleep being so much sweeter than a riot. Across the street he saw a trio of nonchalant looking police cars, gathering dew in the early morning.

He boarded a taxi, thankful for the police presence but even more thankful that the cab driver either did not recognize him or simply did not care. His fingers patted nervously against his brief case - he just wanted the day to end. They headed for the city center.

Anders hardly noticed when the taxi came to a very gradual halt. A warm torrent of fear pulsed through him. He leaned across to see the driver angled awkwardly over the steering wheel, apparently asleep.

Shaking the fellow did not seem to rouse him from his slumber. Then he thought to himself: They had stalled in the middle of the street, why weren't other motorists honking, hollering and shouting as is typical of civilized society in such situations.

He leaped out of the car thinking that perhaps he would have greater success waking up the taxi man if he shook him sideways from outside the car. The instant Anders exited the vehicle he knew that something was terribly wrong.

Strewn all around him were bodies - human bodies - it was as if everyone had fainted in mid action. Somewhere in the lifeless distance a fire alarm was blaring off.

He touched the driver's neck. No pulse. He was dead. He looked around him - policemen, lovers, little girls and their mothers... all gone. . It was an unsettling real life take of what he had seen in the video some twenty hours before.

By now he had stopped doubting the truth of the video stream. Next, they would be coming for him. He was enraged. This was mass murder. Whatever their ultimate purpose was, he would never let them get him. He broke into a frantic run.

Even before he could finish his next thought ,the relay pod from the mother ship descended - it came down in a blinding whirlwind of brilliant white that tore at his eyes, utterly disorienting him.

Before he could even compute in which direction he should run to, firm synthetic arms gripped his torso , arms and legs, effortlessly dragging him into his new home , the cryogenic chamber. In an instant , he was zapped up to the mother -ship , thousands of miles above the earth.

IV

On 4th October 2016 astronomers at the Girawali Space Observatory Pune , India noted a mass the size of an asteroid approaching earth.

The large mass which appeared to have been headed for a collision course with the planet came to an unexpected halt 140, 000 miles from the earth and comfortably set itself in orbit.

By then, it had become clear that the mass was not an Asteroid but an alien craft of immense proportions and indescribable mechanical ingenuity.

It was christened the Necho by virtue of the endless hieroglyphic-like writings that were meticulously embedded along the entire length its hull. The undecipherable writings were a remarkable artistic feat, exuberant with endless detail and subtle variations of internal harmony and texture.

The Necho was a perfect sphere and as it made orbit, it spun at a ponderous pace of a single rotation for every earth week.

The United Nations quickly formed an interstellar liaison committee that became in charge of broadcasting signals across to the Necho via satellite. While it was impossible to tell if the intelligences in the vessel could interpret the messages or even if they had any means of converting microwave transmission to audio and video, the general consensus was that *some* form of communication ought to be attempted.

The messages sent were of peace, of cooperation, of delight at discovering that men were not the only ones in the universe and of a readiness to learn from and share with each other in matters artistic, cultural and technological.

Understandably, the UN was not the only entity that broadcast signals to the Necho; various lobby groups and even individuals with the technology attempted to communicate with the orbiting ship.

Thus during this period , there was a barrage of information sent forth to space : from the metalcore of *As I Lay Dying* to the piano concertos of Mozart ; from the finals of the UEFA champions League to images from current and forgotten wars; from cartoons to soap operas ; quite literally anything that men could come up with was sent out.

However, no message from the Necho was forthcoming. The United Nations began exploring alternative means of communication, perhaps a space probe fitted with a massive visual display would approach the Necho and then beam a message across.

Still there was much that had to be considered – what if approach to the Necho was regarded as hostile? What if the alien species simply did not have the capacity for visual communication?

It was in the midst of these debates, that a signal *was* sent from the Necho. No one understood how but

the message overrode every other telecommunication signal on earth. On 25th December 2016 every person on the planet who was in front of a computer, a TV Set, a smart phone or a tablet received the same ominous video stream from the Necho.

The alien broadcast lasted no longer than 20 minutes but in those twenty minutes it said it all. The alien observers were going to wipe mankind from the surface of the earth – all mankind except a man and a woman – these would be preserved alive in the Necho.

The stream was extremely detailed, it did not have any audio but it went as far as to show *how* the human population would be decimated.

Sleeper cells that had been planted under the earth decades earlier would respond to some unspecified trigger from the Necho. These sleepers were deep in the Amazon, the Congo basin, the Himalayas and the Sahara.

The video showed the sleepers burrowing their way up from the depths of the earth and releasing a toxin that within hours would diffuse throughout the entire planet, decimating humanity.

Afterwards, transport pods from the mother-ship would descend to pick the only surviving humans – a dazed looking girl of Somali or perhaps Arabic origin and an agitated Caucasian young man in a blue suit.

Mass panic followed the transmission – the United Nations unanimously voted to launch an all out nuclear attack on the Necho. Secondary nuclear strikes would follow in the locations that the sleeper cells were supposed to be.

Within a matter of hours, the young man in the video was positively identified as a Swiss business analyst, Anders Andreas. It took longer to unearth the identity of the girl but soon enough it was discovered that she was Yerusalema Addis, an inmate of a mental Asylum at Amhara, Ethiopia.

The world stood still. It would take the United Nations exactly seventy two hours to launch their nuclear strike but no one knew how long it would take for the Necho to trigger its sleepers.

In the end the UN was too late. Just twenty hours after the transmission the sleeper units were activated. They found their way to the surface and noiselessly released their colorless odorless elixir. Within 3 hours the planet was silent.

IV

Alem's daughter was taken from her immediately after her birth, Alem never got to hold her in her arms.

Where are you taking her?

The question was answered by a swift slap – political prisoners had no right to ask questions. The next

day Alem was executed for her crimes against the state.

The child was taken to the Raheem mental asylum. A kindly nurse , Ayah Eleni , named the girl Yerusalema and raised her as her own. When the girl was a week shy of ten, the nurse died and the authorities found it much more expedient to lump her in with the other inmates rather than meet the costs for her education, she being a girl, it was unlikely that taking her to school would do much good.

On her first night at the asylum as an inmate, what she thought was a wasp bit her at the back of her neck. She swiped it and it fell to the ground with an ominously metallic sound. When she knelt to pick it up, it disintegrated to ash.

She told the nurse on the duty about the wasp that turned into ash but of course this only served to confirm that the poor girl was crazy after all. The scar from the bite never quite disappeared.

V

Mommy had the longest most marvelous golden brown hair but the chemo meant that all that had to go. Anders loved daddy but daddy had gone to live with Aunty Becky and the little boy could just not understand why he had gone away visiting for so long when mommy was so sick.

It was only just possible for the little boy to snuggle close by his mother on her wheelchair and she spent Sunday afternoons singing to him and retelling the Viking myths that she had learnt from her father.

One Sunday in the middle of the tale about Thor's visit to the land of the giants , an insect bit the boy and he could not stop crying.

Sh...mommy caught it , it won't bite again , his mother comforted him as she rocked him gently in her arms. She tried to squash the bug in between her fingers but it could not be squished, in fact, there was something oddly synthetic about it.

She brought it closer to her eyes and noticed its syringe like proboscis and its solid mechanical grooves – it was the most un-insect thing she had ever seen. They were at the front porch of their modest home that had bright white walls and a creamy picket fence. Gently; she placed the boy aside and wheeled herself in.

She placed the curious insect in one of her numerous medicine bottles and made a mental note to place it under the microscope as soon as she could. Fancy the only entomologist in Augustine coming across such a peculiar specimen, maybe it was a new species altogether! *Perhaps this strange fellow is going to finally land me that research grant*, she kidded to herself as she wheeled back out. When she came back the boy was already asleep.

That night, Caren Isolde Wilhem died in her sleep .A week later, Anders moved in with his father and his young mistress. The scar from the insect bite never healed.

Miami Tribune: April 2nd 1960 , excerpt

Although this time of the year is generally not associated with meteor showers, scientist have reported an unprecedented number of meteors penetrating the earth's atmosphere. Just yesterday the Boston observatory noted 20 different cases of meteors that actually hit the earth.

Fortunately these celestial bodies seem to strike at places with no human population. One especially large one is reported to have landed somewhere in the heart of the Sahara desert. Were it not for the advances made in the area of satellite technology this meteor fall would probably have gone undetected.

Planetary astronomers are eager to examine the meteors but are afraid that just like the ones that landed at the Amazon last month , finding them would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack . At the end of the day the public should simply be relieved that so far no giant meteor has struck Tampa Bay.

END

SHESHI SHARMA

Multi Cultural Exchange Program, they called it – It was one of the new electives one had to endure if ever they hoped to attain interim citizenship. Interim citizenship was attained after one passed the Ken exam, ultimate citizenship, which came much later on, was awarded only to those who passed the more advanced Zen exam.

Nakato Kaede felt the immensity of the situation bear down upon him like a freighter slowly and surely approaching dock. Both his parents were ultimate citizens – his father had been the youngest Zetan to pass the Ken, at only ten and his mother had set the national record for her year.

Thus, he was something of a special one - a child of prophecy. There are fewer ways of setting one up for failure. Every nerve in his body seemed to tingle with a constricting sense of impending doom.

The Superium breezed into the room, his unnecessarily long garments flowing behind him like white noise after a clear transmission.

The objective of the course was simple; he condescended to explain, regarding them as though they were flawed prototypes of some superfluous product he would never purchase.

They were to interact with cadets from the Outer Zones – afterwards they were to write comprehensive reports in which they demonstrated by empirical means the superiority of Zetan technology, culture and administration.

The interaction was to be actuated by means of glass-glove augmented reality mobile consoles. Point to point neuro plug-ins would have been much more suitable but the Superium was afraid most of the Outer Zones were yet to attain such levels of technological excellence.

An academy developed digitally signed comm. interact app had already been uploaded onto their glass consoles. The report templates were to be found in the schools' resource repository on Cloud X2.

The Superium's voice was a cackle – something like a cough continuously restrained but bullishly finding its way to the light of day. The cadets appeared to be in various degrees of boredom, some were openly browsing tech sites on their holo_screens. On Zeta, life was tech, everything else was a distraction. Neither party seemed particularly thrilled to be in the room.

Soon , the class was over, and the cadets streamed out, unconscious of each other, immersed in their portable holo_screens, scouring the web for the newest APIs, encryption and decryption algorithms, reverse engineering hacks and anything else that bled.

Back home, Nakato Kaede lay back on his bed, geared into his glass-glove console kit and activated the interact app.

He had never been particularly confident in his ability at chi level coding. He knew he had not done well in distributed Sys Analysis and that he was only above average in the other disciplines he took, excepting algorithm design.

If he wanted a decent grade, he would have to take the MCE program seriously. He was well aware of the virtue of taking care of the most unpleasant tasks first – *I had better get done with this crap as soon as possible*, he thought to himself.

The glass console was a dark band worn over the eyes. Navigation was done by voice or the extensor gloves worn by the user

ok_glass, he whispered the activate command.

He navigated to the new apps section, located the schools' interact app and loaded it. The outlines of his room blurred, hazed out like fluorescence slowly dying as the crisp neon and iridium display of the glass console invaded his entire field of vision.

A warm pulse fired into his fingers when the glove console merged with his nerve endings – it felt warm and anonymous; streams of electrons raced up the length of his to his ever receptive cerebral cortex.

A HD display edged out all mini views and its pixels concentrated to form sharp lines that eventually evened out to form an image – a video stream to be precise.

He saw her – it was as though she were right there in his room. In fact she *was* right there, seated across him on an easy chair he was certain he did not own.

By intuition he realized that the app was generating a compound virtual environment using his room and the immediate surroundings of his glass partner as input.

The girl facing him had gently sloping eyes, a nose and lips that would perhaps have been better placed on someone slightly younger, long golden braids and a soft cleft chin. Her skin which was of a most peculiar shade fascinated him, but it bothered him that she had hair and that she did not appear to have a barcode anywhere on her person.

“Health Concern :what’s wrong with your skin? Have you recently undergone a surgical procedure?”

“No, I have not recently undergone a surgical procedure, and have you no greetings at Zeta.”

“What are greetings?”

“How you initiate conversation..”

“Conversation?”

“Yes, verbal interaction.”

“Subject. Then content. If necessary, context.”

“Have you no pleasantries then?”

“Pleasantries are superfluous appendages to language – formal functional means of expression maximize production in an object oriented society as demonstrated by Isagi, Kurt and Kagawa Paper 4b Volume IV, Deca 4300 ACS.”

A look of interminable exhaustion flickered across her eyes for just a second. He pursued the matter of her skin – it was of a most unhealthy shade.

“Perhaps you should visit a medic about your skin before we proceed with further academic discourse.”

“There is nothing wrong with my skin; this is the natural complexion of most Sahel inhabitants. The skin color ranges from dark to ebony to chocolate – mine is, well, éclair.”

Nakato Kaede found this to be absurd. First no barcode and now this thing about different skin colors. She could clearly see the bewilderment and disbelief on his face.

“I read that on Zeta, people can live entire lifetimes without even knowing of the existence of the Outer Zones. There are many things you need to know, about us.

“First of all it is only Zetans who use the term ‘Outer Zones’, we refer to our home as Terra. Second, there are different races on Terra with skin colors more varied and beautiful than your style of conversation.

“It appears you just plugged in without taking the time to consider the course material.”

His face went red. He considered lying but realized that that would only make him look stupider.

“Your assessment’s truth value evaluates to one; am afraid I did not get the chance to explore the necessary material.”

“Then perhaps you should do so before we proceed with any further academic discourse —” she ended the conversation sharply.

The display blinked off – she had logged out – all Nakato could see was a characterless blue screen and a bland set of options.

He flipped through the menu to a section that had the option: *review course material*.

The course objective section was lengthy and exhaustive but he was hardly interested in that. He wanted to learn more about the Outer Zones – he delved into the text but soon he was disappointed – it was incredibly shallow, repetitive and in many ways a paraphrase of the skimpy information he had been fed since the onset of his formal education

There was the usual contrast of the blissful state of affairs in Zeta with the turmoil in the Outer Zones, what the girl had referred to as *Terra*. There was peace on Zeta, war on Terra. Abundance on Zeta, hun-

ger on Terra , stability on Zeta, uncertainty on Terra . The report read like an interminable End User License AgreementIt was basically paragraph upon paragraph of premeditated propaganda with bright blue hyperlinks leading to even more propaganda. Then he remembered how she had spoken with such smug assurance about Zeta, she must have done quite some research on the matter. Then a thought came to him, *surely she could not have read the same things he was reading.*

Since she was from the Outer Zone, or Terra then perhaps her course material was *different* from his. It was unlikely that the Terrans would portray themselves in such unflattering light – it would also be interesting, he realized, to find out just what the Terrans thought of Zeta.

He did a quick look up that led him to her name , a strange one , to be sure – Sheshi Sharma – he whispered the six syllables, breathed them as if they were something sacred ,a mantra, it felt strange like the steady hum of the subway yet graceful and gentle like fingers sliding across a crystal display.

He activated his glass_console

ok_glass , compose an insta_mes

To : Sharma, Sheshi<shesha15@nubia.ed>

From : Nakato, Kaede <47443_73@zecol.zt>

CC : null

Subject : course material

Context : MCE

Text : I require your course material for the MCE program.

It would seem my material lacks analytical depth.

ok_glass send.

The reply popped up in less than a minute – she must have been online even though her avatar, a feather, more accurately, a quilt appeared grayed out.

He consumed the information as it streamed past him, the entirety of his sensorium buried deep in the waves of black and blue lines that swept across his eyes , the vid streams , HD images and podcasts.

It was true that Terra was politically unstable, but this was neither strictly nor universally true. While some zones engaged in war, others lived in relative peace. There were also the problems of hunger, ter-

rorism and inequality but these were also not universal.

Still they were widespread. He could not understand why he felt disappointed in the fact that his Superi-ums had, for the most part been right all along – at the end of the valuation, he had to agree that Terra must be a deplorable place to live.

Despite this there were many things about Terra that fascinated him, not least of which was the matter of race – according to one system of classification, there were five different Terran races. Nakato Kaede found it hard, almost impossible to believe that people could be born with skin of a color different from his. He also found it puzzling that the women on Terra, regardless of race did not have bald, tattooed heads.

None of them had barcodes; neither the men nor the women. It was ridiculous; how did they run their administrative grids without the barcode system? Then it occurred to him that perhaps they did not have a computerized governing grid. In that case how were they governed?

The zones had various types of government. It seemed to him that there was as much variety in Terran forms of government as there were Terran diseases. Sheshi Sharma came from Sahel, according to the information, her zone was ruled by a dictator.

He followed the hyperlink – *A dictator was a self imposed leader who took power usually by force through a coup d etat...*

Coup de tat? That would have to wait another day he was tired of following links.

Next he read the material she had given him on Zeta.

All Zetans had actually immigrated from Terra circa 1800 DECA ACS. At that time, the United Council had enforced Purification Laws that forbade the unholy mixing of the races. The Unified Peoples Republic of Mongolia was at the forefront of space exploration, and they began an ambitious program to colonize their moon, Terra's only moon, Zeta.

A decade later, a million Mongolians were on the moon. By then, however, the political and economic situation on Terra had deteriorated so much that little attention was given to exploration and colonization. The fledgling colony had to make do without much help from their parent nation Relations between Zeta and Mongolia were cool, to say the least.

Five decades later Zeta became completely autonomous after which it disowned Mongolia and Terra. This marked the onset of the Zetan tech renaissance – a profusion of intense and original technological advancements in the fields of software engineering and robotics.

While political relations between Zeta and Terra were acerbic, trade between the two flourished. The Outer Zones were more than happy to pay big - in currency and in natural resources - for the software and ultra-processing chips that Zeta specialized in developing.

With the technological achievements came a radical shift in the Zetan education system; all disciplines regarded to be superfluous were eliminated and replaced with industrially conscious ones. History was only important in the context of programming methodologies; art and music were not considered to be such unless they were generated algorithmically.

After three days of reviewing, reading and re-reading the literature, Nakato Kaede finally felt ready to contact Sheshi Sharma.

She was in purple, an elegant blouse that clung loosely over her revealing a snatch of her shoulder. Her hair looked like molecule thick strands of copper wire dyed black; deep and dark, yet darker still with shades of brown crossing right above her ear.

— I don't think it's feasible for this to continue, she began.

You have neglected to specify context, he dutifully reminded her.

— I mean the Exchange Program, there's a civil war in Sahel, am surprised you're unaware.

I have not received any such information over the newscast stream,

and in all honesty he hadn't which was surprising because half of Zetan Journalism was solidly rooted in reporting Terran tragedies.

— *Listen*, she commanded, and he did...

In the silence that ensued, he heard strange, abrupt sounds in the background like high gain speakers suddenly powered on and then switched off. They were explosions.

— *Those are air to surface missiles, my family and I are in a community bunker*,

she spoke with little emotion as though revealing even an iota of grief would be an indignity.

— *We've been here the last three days, barely had time to change ...my hair's a mess*, she continued and then stopped uncertainly as if she had wanted to call a sub routine but had forgotten the key combination that launched the command.

Your current situation is unfortunate from both a social and industrial point of view, he found himself saying.

He was feeling something churning in his blood, a wild sensation, an endless loop, a runaway current. He wanted to tell her something but he did not know how to express the thought, not even by means of equations. It was a sentiment that eluded all manner of computation.

He knew he ought to use words, but he realized in a moment of silent personal horror, that his vocabulary simply did not span that range.

— *I suppose that's what passes for an apology at Zeta; but you needn't apologize, I blame Zeta's Ruling Council, not individual Zetans. It's a pity to run an entire economy from selling military hardware and*

software. Her voice had taken on a steely edge, and was gaining momentum.

— *With our squabbling, Zeta grows ever wealthier, and isn't it funny that both the Sahel Federation and the Uhuru rebels are both running cutting edge Zetan merchandise?* Ironically, there was no mirth in her voice.

I question the logical soundness of your allegations; Zeta is a peace loving...

Before he could finish, there was a crack of an explosion – so loud and thunderous it startled him as it ripped past his eardrums. Sheshi was yanked to the floor, and for the first time he became aware of other blurry shapes, human figurines generated by the compound virtual environment

His room had become a bunker, a bomb shelter full of women and children – he was seated, but he was the only one that could afford a luxury. Everyone else was pinned to the floor as if by some invisible magnet.

Sheshi was huddled at a corner not far from him, more crouched than fallen. Instinctively, he knelt down to reach her but all he felt was the mocking air from his room.

A second doubly violent series of explosion floored her completely – the glass console flew from her head and clattered to the floor. He got a dead video signal, but the audio was still active.

Nakato Kaede heard their screams, their groans and agonizing howls. They were most distinct. Children wailed, Mothers tried to calm them in urgent panic stricken tones. Meanwhile, a barrage of explosions escorted the bunker from tremor to tremor.

He felt a soft and warm sensation sweep across his hands, his fingers felt as though they were plugged in his ears. Somehow, the haptic-sensory exchange had been activated– Sharma had fallen with her hands on the sides of her head, and in that moment, he was touching her cheeks.

It lasted for about a second and then his console blacked out and blinked an annoying 404, before taking him back to the home screen. No audio, no video, no touch.

He tried to re establish the connection but he got the same error *404.5 – permanent link failure*.

The MCE program, the Superium explained was experimental in nature – it was being tried on a pilot basis so its abrupt cancellation need not have taken them by surprise. Nobody in the lecture hall seemed to mind – it was a relief to not have to be bogged down by anything non tech.

Only Nakato Kaede could not let it go so easily – he wished he could reset his registers, format his internal drive and empty his stack so that somehow every single memory of Sheshi Sharma would fade away.

Every day he was plagued by that image of her helpless on the floor. Every night he was haunted by the sensation that electrified him when for an instance he touched her cheeks.

Nakato Kaede passed the Ken exam, not exceptionally, but satisfactorily - his parents were there at the Ken confirmation. In fact his father noted with a certain suppressed pride that Nakato Kaede's score on a certain discipline, algorithm analysis was the highest, not just for that year – but ever.

The Zeta institute of advanced software prototyping was quick to take him up and within a week he was at his new station on Subzone-X, Sector V. He was assigned to a gaming project and his primary duty was logic design. All the games he worked with were combat games – military combat with emphasis on strategy and resource optimization.

He knew that Sharma had been right when they asked him to design an algorithm to help guide an armed drone to potential underground bunkers. The algorithm would determine the probable location of the bunkers from raw data such as population density, location of past bunkers and topography. It was a top priority project for clients on Terra.

He asked his Scrum Master why the UI was so primitive, almost Spartan whereas the tactical considerations were advanced beyond the scope of any nominal combat game.

— *You know clients, you just give them what they want , never argue with them.*

Nakato saw straight through the lie. There never had been a client who wanted such a disproportionately advanced game – there never would be ; there was only Zeta and Terra and war and Sheshi Sharma trapped somewhere under the earth in a crowded bomb shelter.

THE END

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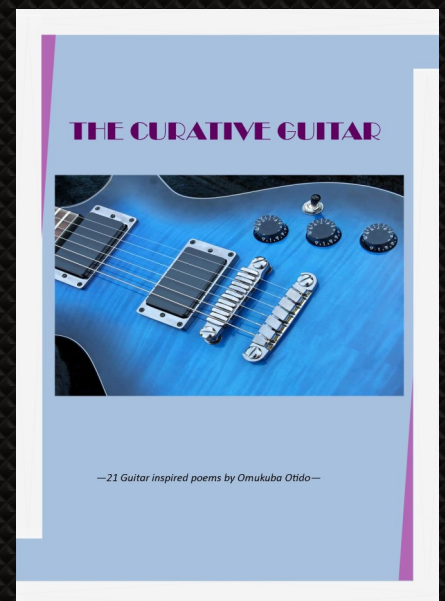
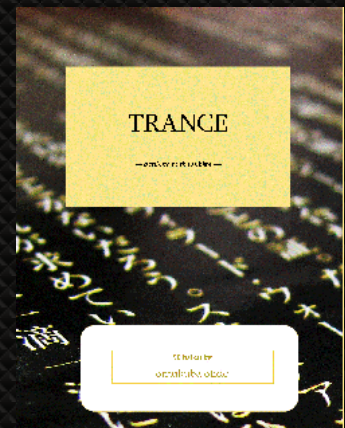
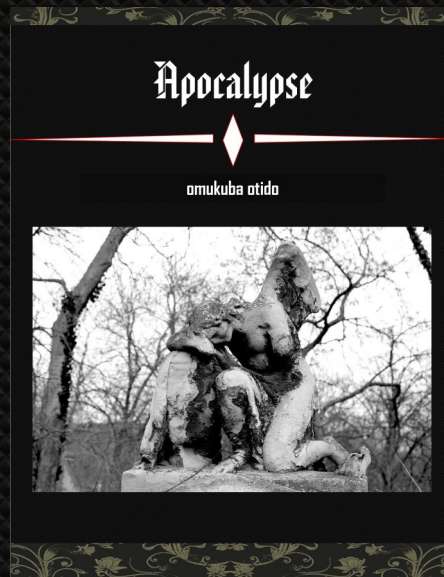
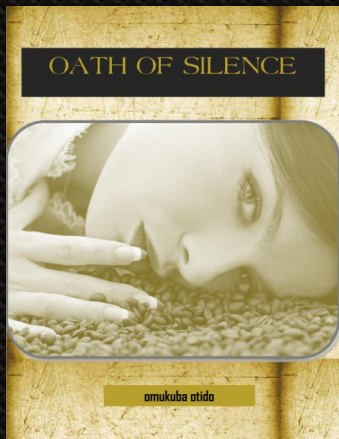
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PHANTASMAGORIA



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